

After several centuries of oppression and division under the judges, Israel believed that a king was the solution. Although their motives were bad, it was God's will to make Israel into a monarchy. God had promised kings to Abraham and Jacob (Gen. 17:6, 16; 35:11) and given instructions concerning kings through Moses (Deut. 17:14-20).

All the prohibitions concerning kings were given to prevent Israel from becoming politically entangled with other nations or imitating their sins. There were several problems with such entanglements. God had promised Israel victory and prosperity, provided they obeyed him. When they turned to other nations:

- (1) They demonstrated a lack of faith in God's word and power to protect and bless them.
- (2) God's name was weakened in the eyes of other nations. As the world saw it, Israel's God could not help his people.
- (3) Turning to other nations for help was Israel's replacement for repentance and prayer. They thought they could remain in sin and find salvation without God.
- (4) Idolatry and other sins of the nations were imported into Israel through these ties.

God knew exactly what Israel would one day say: "I will set a king over me, like all the nations that are around me" (Deut. 17:14). So they did: "There shall be a king over us, that we also may be like all the nations" (1 Sam. 8:19-20).

These are the rules for kings from Deuteronomy 17:14-20 in brief:

- (1) God will choose the king.
- (2) He must be a native Israelite.
- (3) He must not acquire many horses, especially from Egypt.
- (4) He must not acquire many wives for himself.
- (5) He must not acquire excessive silver and gold for himself.
- (6) Upon taking the throne, he must write a copy of the Law and read it all his life.

Acquiring horses and turning to Egypt for help was a temptation when strong nations, like Assyria and Babylon, intimidated Israel (Isa. 30:1-5; 31:1-3; Jer. 42:13-22). Israel did not need Egypt or its horses to defend itself. It needed faith in God's promised protection.

Ancient near eastern cultures had a custom of solidifying political alliances through marriages between princesses and kings. Solomon married hundreds of foreign princesses, and they turned his heart away to their nations' idols, just as God had warned (1 Kings 11:1-8; Neh. 13:23-27). In the other nations, kings also had harems of women for sexual gratification. Israel's kings were not to engage in either of these corrupting practices. David had at least eight wives named in the Bible, but they did not turn his heart away from God. They were all Israelites, either by birth or conversion, and the descriptions of their relationships show that they were not a harem. For example, David praised Abigail's wisdom (1 Sam. 25:32-33), Michal loved David and helped him against Saul (1 Sam. 18:20; 19:11-14), Michal later rebuked him (2 Sam. 6:20), and his children by all his wives were listed as legitimate descendants (2 Sam. 3:2-5; 1 Chron. 3:1-9). David's wives were lawful, while Solomon's were not.

The acquisition of excessive wealth may have referred to tyrannical taxation and/or tributes and payoffs imposed by a dominant nation. Interestingly, Solomon was known for both heavy taxation and receiving tributes, but the taxes supported various projects for Israel's good, and the tributes seem to have been offered willingly rather than under threats (1 Kings 12:3-4; 4:24; 10:24-25). Solomon's immense wealth was a gift from God (1 Kings 3:13).

Israel wanted a king like the other nations, but the kings of other nations were wicked. Also, political entanglements of all kinds would inevitably introduce idolatry into Israel. Unfortunately, most of Israel's kings did not follow these rules, and their reigns were characterized by the sins God's rules would've prevented.