

## **Deut 17:14–18:8 Principles Pertaining to Kings, Priests, and Levites**

When you begin a new job, you may receive an employee handbook of some kind. In the pages of that handbook, you'll learn your job description and other expectations of your employment. If you follow the instructions in the employee handbook, you will likely retain your job. If you don't, you probably won't.

What we have in this section of Deut is an employee handbook of sorts. It pertains to future kings, priests, and Levites. It explains what they can and cannot do as officials in the theocracy.

Israel was a theocracy. That is, the government officials ruled for God. God ruled the nation through these officials. That was the way it was supposed to be at least. Over the history of Israel, many of the kings and priests did not remain faithful to these directions. The result was chaos, oppression, and destruction.

But all of that was far in the future when Moses spoke these words. Moses is giving principles that will apply once the nation settles down in the PL. That will happen shortly after he speaks these words, so the people must understand how to fulfill these expectations.

We do not function within this theocratic system. We are not Israel. We don't have kings in our political system, and we don't have priests or Levites in the church. These directions pertain specifically to the nation of Israel as it would live in the PL. However, we do find some timeless principles here that still pertain to us today.

Let's consider God's expectations for the theocratic officials as they live in the PL.

## I. Principles regarding kings

### A. .14-15a Select a king.

After Israel enters the land and possess it, it may select a king.

1. Choosing a king was *permitted* but not *commanded*. They could function as a nation without a king.
2. But Moses could foresee a time in the future when Israel would want a king to rule over them like the other nations. Moses does not suggest here that it would be wrong for the nation to ask for a king. When they install a king, they have to follow the guidelines listed here.

### B. .15b He must be an Israelite.

1. He must be chosen from among your brethren; a brother; i.e., an Israelite
2. He must not be a foreigner.

### C. .16-17 His powers are limited.

Israel's king was not supposed to be much like the kings of the ancient world. Israel's kings would be strictly limited in their powers.

Moses mentions three particular limitations on the future king's powers:

#### 1. .16 He must not multiply horses (*weapons*)

- a) Horses were a primary weapon of war. Many of the surrounding nations used chariots in warfare, and chariots needed horses to pull them. A strong military at that time was based on having many horses.

- b) .16b The king must not send people back to Egypt to buy horses. The Egyptians were horse breeders. Egypt was well-known in the ancient world as the place to buy horses for your military.

Archaeological evidence suggests that Egypt was a primary source of horses and chariots for military purposes at this time.

- c) The primary danger here is in trusting in military strength instead of in the Lord. Israel must depend on God to save them, not on their weapons of military might.

Psalm 20:7 *Some trust in chariots, and some in horses;  
But we will remember the name of the LORD our God.*

God had promised that Israel would be victorious over all their enemies if they would keep God's commandments. Victory did not depend on weapons; it depended on faithfulness to God.

2. .17 He must not multiply *wives*.

- a) Marrying multiple wives was a strategy ancient kings often used to create alliances between kingdoms. Pagan kings typically had many wives.
- b) The Israelite king must not pursue political alliances through marriage.
- c) The primary danger here is that foreign wives would turn away the king from following the Lord; the king would listen to his wives rather than to God.
- d) Marriage to non-Israelite women would introduce idolatry into the country.

E.g., Solomon (1 Kings 11)

3. .17b He shall not multiply silver and gold (*wealth*) for himself.

- a) Wealth can create a sense of power and independence. Those who are rich tend to trust in the power of money instead of trusting in God.
- b) Wealth can also develop a sense of materialism and luxury. The king should not be greedy for material wealth and he should not be pursuing a luxurious lifestyle.
- c) The primary danger here is that the king would trust in riches and not in God.

Kings of that era typically sought to amass for themselves the very things Moses here limits—*weapons, wives, wealth*.

And notice the word “multiply” in these verses. The prohibition here pertains to getting a lot of these things and setting your heart on them. The king can have weapons, wives, and wealth, but his heart should not be set on multiplying such things. He should not be trusting these things; the king must trust in God for everything that Israel needed.

The point is that the king of the Israelites must not be like the pagan kings of the surrounding nations. They must not adopt these heathen values. The Israelite kings must trust in God, not in the military, political alliances, or wealth.

**Quote:** The Lord's people and their rulers were to treasure and depend on [God] more than anything else.<sup>1</sup>

**App:** Power, women, and wealth are common temptations for political rulers and for many other people still today. People seek to multiply such things for themselves, and in doing so, they often ruin themselves. We should be satisfied with what God gives us and not fall into these common temptations.

D. .18 He must be familiar with and submit to God's law.

Instead of following the example of the heathen kings around him and adopting their ways, the Israelite king must know and follow God's law.

1. .18 He shall write a copy of the law.

a) He could write this out himself or have a scribe make out a copy of the law for him.

b) .18 The text mentions a particular copy of "this law" – it's one "before the priests, the Levites." Moses expected the priests and Levites to maintain a copy of this book, probably at the central altar, perhaps near the Ark of the Covenant. The king makes a copy of that document.

c) It seems likely that "this law" is the book of Deut, not the entire law of Moses.

[ **BTW**, the Greek translation at this point uses the word "*deuteronomion*," meaning, "second law." That's where we get the name of the book—Deuteronomy—the second law—a second giving of the law. ]

2. .19 Keep it with him and read it. During his entire reign as king, he should be regularly reading the law and make sure that he carefully follows the commands and principles in it.

3. .19b-20 Several results of familiarity with the law:

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, vol. 4, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 265.

- a) The king would learn the fear God—he would maintain a reverent and submissive attitude toward God by reading the law regularly.

Remember that the king is supposed to rule for God; he's God's representative over his people. So he must be very familiar with God's law.

**Illus.:** We expect our elected officials to be very familiar with the constitution and the laws of the land. The law was Israel's constitution, so the king should be very familiar with it.

- b) .19end The king would observe the law/statutes.

**Quote:** The king becomes the model Israelite and student of the law, ... in modelling the fear of the Lord and righteousness ... to the nation.<sup>2</sup>

The nation usually followed the example of the king.

An important implication of all of this is that the king is under the authority of Scripture. The king does not establish the law; God has already established the law, and the king is responsible to make sure that both he and the nation follow the law. The law of God, not the king, was the highest authority.

**App:** That's still true today. God's word is the ultimate authority.

- c) .20 The king's heart would not be lifted up above his brothers.

Everyone is equal before God. Everyone is under the same law. God has delegated some authority to the king, but the king is not to lift himself up above all the other Israelites. I.e., the king should not be proud or arrogant.

- d) .20b The king would not turn aside from the commandment.

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<sup>2</sup> Edward J. Woods, *Deuteronomy: An Introduction and Commentary*, ed. David G. Firth, vol. 5, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Nottingham, England: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 220.

The king does not have the authority to override God's law. His primary job was to insure that the nation obeyed God's commands.

- e) .20c The king and his children would prolong their days.
  - (1) If the king is obedient to the law, God would grant him a long, happy, peaceful reign. Faithful obedience would result in blessing.
  - (2) If he turned aside from the law, the opposite would be the case—he'd have a short, unhappy, conflict-filled reign.

Sadly, most of the kings of Israel did not follow these guidelines. Many of the kings of Israel had a short, unhappy reign and came to a violent end.

**App:** Under our system of government, we don't have a king; we have a president. And the president is not considered to be a representative of God; he's a representative of the people. The longest he can retain that position is eight years; he cannot establish a family dynasty. So there is no *direct* parallel here.

However, we could certainly see the value in having a president that followed these principles—especially that he would trust in God and be familiar with God's Word. It would be wonderful to have a president who sets a good example for the rest of us.

At the very least, our government officials should be familiar with the constitution and the laws of the land.

And it would be good for the president to have limited powers. Presidents and kings tend to expand their powers until they become dictators. It would be better to drastically limit the power of the president. Following these guidelines would greatly benefit our leaders and our country.

## II. 18:1-8 Principles regarding priests and Levites

The purpose of this section is to remind Israel about how they were responsible to provide for the priests and Levites.

All the priests and Levites were from the tribe of Levi, but the priests were direct descendants of Aaron, while the Levites may have descended from other parts of the tribe of Levi. All of priests were Levites (from that tribe), but only some of Levites were priests.

Levites generally served as teachers of the law and assistants to the priests, while the priests generally officiated the sacrificial system at the tabernacle.

- A. .1 They have no part or inheritance with Israel (cf. Num 18).
  - 1. All the other tribes of Israel were allotted land in Canaan. Each tribe had its own section of property.
  - 2. Unlike the other tribes of Israel, Levi had no allotment of land in the PL.
  - 3. They were given 48 cities scattered throughout the entire PL, and near each of those cities, the Levites had pasture lands (Num 35:2-8). They could also own houses in the cities. But the priests and Levites did not have the same land allotment that the others had.
- B. .1 They eat from the offerings of the Lord—they were entitled to eat some of the sacrificial food that the people brought to the central altar. That was their inheritance.  
But ultimately ...
- C. .2 The Lord is their inheritance. The Lord provided for them through the sacrificial system. Their support came from the work they did in and around the tabernacle. They did not have territorial *land*, but they had the *Lord*. They had a privileged position among the tribes.  
*Deuteronomy 10:9    Levi has no portion nor inheritance with his brethren; the LORD is his inheritance, just as the LORD your God promised him.*
- D. .3 They receive a portion from the sacrifices the people brought regularly.
  - 1. From the sacrificial animals
    - a) From a bull or a sheep—these were the animals typically used for sacrifice.
    - b) The shoulder, the cheeks, and the stomach
      - (1) Tradition suggests that the *right* shoulder of the sacrificial animal would be given to the priests. Probably that means the whole right leg. You’ve heard of “leg of lamb”?

[ Interestingly, at a temple at Lachish, archaeologist excavated a pit which contained a great number of the right shoulder bones of sheep.<sup>3</sup> ]

- (2) .3end Sheep have four stomachs, and this word apparently refers to the forth one. This stomach had a good bit of fat attached to it, so that's probably why it was considered a good part of the sheep.

In our world, we don't appreciate how important animal fat is to human health and comfort. People would use animal fats for all kinds of things.

Or it's possible that "stomach" stands for all the inner parts of the animal; the innards, the viscera; the guts. They could use the innards of these animals for various uses.

2. .4 From the first fruits
- a) Food and drink: grain and wine
  - b) Oil—probably olive oil
  - c) Fleece/wool—material for making clothing.

That's not all that the priests and Levites received. Lev 7:31-35 tells us that other parts of the sacrificial animals also belonged to the Levites. They also received the third-year tithe (14:27-29). All in all, the priests and Levites probably made a fairly good living, as long as the sacrificial system was operating properly. God provided abundantly for those serving him.

- E. .5 Reason: the Lord has chosen the priests and Levites to serve in the name of the Lord. God established this system, and Israel must fulfill these responsibilities because it's God's will.

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<sup>3</sup> Edward J. Woods, *Deuteronomy: An Introduction and Commentary*, ed. David G. Firth, vol. 5, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Nottingham, England: InterVarsity Press, 2011).



**Quote:** In the final analysis [the priests and Levites] were at the mercy of their fellow countrymen who had the responsibility as well as the privilege of caring for them. This would free them up to undertake their God-given role as the Lord’s ministers (v. 5).<sup>4</sup>

**App:** In our context, some people serve God as a full-time occupation like the priests and Levites did—i.e., missionaries and pastors. We get our living from the sacrificial giving of the people. As Paul describes it, we “live of the Gospel.” We are sustained in the Lord’s work because people give of their resources.

- F. .6-8 Priests and Levites have the option of serving at the central altar. A priest or Levite could move to the location of the central altar and live there if he wanted to. He had a guaranteed job—to serve along with all the other priests and Levites in and around the central altar.

This assumes that most of the priests and Levites did not serve at the central altar but lived in the priestly cities throughout the PL.

- G. .8 All of those serving at the central altar should receive equal portions, except that some might have a private source of income from other means.

The text mentions “the sale of his inheritance.” The only land a Levite might own was some pasture land near his home town. He might sell or lease out that property when he moved to the central altar location. And he could sell something else he inherited from his family, and that might be another source of income or wealth.

These directions for Israelite officials—kings, Levites, and priests—might seem to be far different from what we experience in our world. Yet we find some timeless principles here that still pertain to us in the church age.

Those in leadership positions are supposed to be subject to the law. They don’t make the law; they follow the law. They are not above the law. Everyone is supposed to be treated equally under the law. It’s important that our leaders know the law and follow it strictly.

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<sup>4</sup> Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, vol. 4, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 268.

It would be very good if our leaders knew God's word and had a sense of moral obligation to obey God's laws. Our leaders should be setting a good example for us. "Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord." It's wise for us to vote for officials who are committed to biblical morality.

Those serving in full-time ministry gain their means of living from the people they serve. Pastors and missionaries are fully dependent on the people of God to provide for them.

And as God promised to the kings, they could expect God's blessing if they were faithfully obedient to God's law. Likewise, we trust that God will bless us when we faithfully follow God's word.