

1 Kings 12: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] 1 Kings chapter 12. Rehoboam went to Shechem, for all Israel had come to Shechem to make him king. And as soon as Jeroboam the son of Nebat heard of it, for he was still in Egypt, where he had fled from King Solomon, then Jeroboam returned from Egypt. And they sent and called him. And Jeroboam and all the assembly of Israel came and said to Rehoboam, Your father made our yoke heavy. Now therefore lighten the hard service of your father and his heavy yoke on us, and we will serve you.

He said to them, Go away for three days, then come again to me. So the people went away. Then King Rehoboam took counsel with the old men, who had stood before Solomon his father while he was yet alive, saying, How do you advise me to answer this people? And they said to him, If you will be a servant to this people today and serve them, and speak good words to them when you answer them, then they will be your servants forever. But he abandoned the counsel that the old men gave him, and took counsel with the young men who had grown up with him, and stood before him. And he said to them, What do you advise that we should answer this people who have said to me, Lighten the yoke that your father put on us? And the young men who had grown up with him said to him, Thus shall you speak to this people who said to you, Your father made our yoke heavy, but you lighten it for us. Thus shall you say to them, My little finger is thicker than my father's thighs. And now whereas my father laid on you a heavy yoke, I will add to your yoke. My father disciplined you with whips, but I will discipline you with scorpions. So Jeroboam and all the people came to Rehoboam the third day, as the king said, Come to me again the third day. And the king answered the people harshly, and forsaking the counsel that the old men had given him, he spoke to them according to the counsel of the young men, saying, My father made your yoke heavy, but I will add to your yoke. My father disciplined you with whips, but I will discipline you with scorpions. So the king did not listen to the people, for it was a turn of affairs brought about by the Lord, that he might fulfil his word, which the Lord spoke by Ahijah the Shalomite to Jeroboam the son of Nebat. And when all Israel saw that the king did not listen to them, the people answered the king, What portion do we have in David?

We have no inheritance in the son of Jesse. To your tents, O Israel, look now to your own house, David. So Israel went to their tents, but Rehoboam reigned over the people of Israel who lived in the cities of Judah. Then king Rehoboam sent Adoram, who was taskmaster over the forced labour, and all Israel stoned him to death with stones, and king Rehoboam hurried to mount his chariot to flee to Jerusalem. So Israel has been in rebellion against the house of David to this day. And when all Israel heard that Jeroboam had returned, they sent and called him to the assembly, and made him king over all Israel. There was none that followed the house of David, but the tribe of Judah only. When Rehoboam came to Jerusalem, he assembled all the house of Judah and the tribe of Benjamin, 180,000 chosen warriors, to fight against the house of Israel, to restore the kingdom to Rehoboam the son of Solomon.

But the word of God came to Shimea, the man of God. Say to Rehoboam the son of Solomon, king of Judah, and to all the house of Judah and Benjamin, and to the rest of the people. Thus says the Lord, you shall not go up or fight against your relatives the people of Israel. Every man returned to his home, for this thing is from me. So they listened to the word of the Lord, and went home again, according to the word of the Lord. Then Jeroboam built Shechem in the hill country of Ephraim, and lived there. And he went out from there and built Penuel. And Jeroboam said in his heart, now the kingdom will turn back to the house of David. If this people go up to offer sacrifices in the temple of the Lord at Jerusalem, then the heart of this people will turn again to their Lord, to Rehoboam king of Judah. And they will kill me and return to Rehoboam king of Judah.

So the king took counsel, and made two calves of gold. And he said to the people, you have gone up to Jerusalem long enough. Behold your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt. And he set one in Bethel, and the other he put in Dan. Then this thing became a sin, for the people went as far as Dan to be before one. He also made temples on high places, and appointed priests from among all the people who were not of the Levites. And Jeroboam appointed a feast on the fifteenth day of the eighth month, like the feast that was in Judah. And he offered sacrifices on the altar. So he did in Bethel, sacrificing to the calves that he made. And he placed in Bethel the priests of the high places that he had made. He went up to the altar that he had made in Bethel on the fifteenth day in the eighth month, in the month that he had devised from his own heart.

[4 : 48] And he instituted a feast from the people of Israel, and went up to the altar to make offerings. In 1 Kings chapter 12 we see the ramifications of the unfaithfulness of Solomon. God had declared that judgment would come upon his son in 1 Kings chapter 11 verses 11 to 13.

Therefore the Lord said to Solomon, Since this has been your practice, and you have not kept my covenant and my statutes that I have commanded you, I will surely tear the kingdom from you, and will give it to your servant. Yet for the sake of David your father I will not do it in your days, but I will tear it out of the hand of your son. However I will not tear away all the kingdom, but I will give one tribe to your son, for the sake of David my servant, and for the sake of Jerusalem that I have chosen. Rehoboam was to be made king at Shechem. This was the place where Joseph was sent before he was sold into slavery. In Genesis chapter 37 Judah had led the brothers in that plot to sell Joseph into slavery. And here we see Judah, as it were, reducing Joseph, the northern tribes, to slavery once more. Shechem is also the site where Levi and Simeon performed their massacre in chapter 34 of Genesis. Abimelech had crowned himself king at Shechem in Judges chapter 9. Comparisons with Abimelech, the violent son of Gideon who came to no good, might be rather ominous for the reign of Rehoboam.

Shechem was also one of the first places that Abram visited in the land before he went to set an altar near Bethel. Jeroboam takes a similar route in this chapter as Peter Lighthouse points out. Jeroboam comes out of Egypt. He leads the assembly of Israel in asking Rehoboam to let his people go. To diminish the burdens placed upon them. In verse 4, Jeroboam sounds very similar to Moses and Aaron in the story of Exodus, which puts Rehoboam in the position of Pharaoh. Solomon had associated with Egypt. He had a marriage treaty with Egypt. He bought and sold horses from Egypt. And he became like Pharaoh in a great many respects. And now his people are wanting someone to let them go. He has become a new Pharaoh. Even though he is supposed to complete the story of the Exodus, bring people into rest in the land, he has turned back to Egypt and brought them into a new sort of slavery.

Rehoboam's response to the delegation from Israel is to ask for time to consult. He first consults with the old men who had formerly counseled Solomon. They advised him to serve the people so that they would serve him. He must put their interests ahead of his own. And if he did this, he would find that they would naturally follow him. The danger was always that the heart of the king would be lifted up over the people as his brothers, and that he would lord it over them.

[7 : 38] This was one of the warnings given in Deuteronomy chapter 17. It was important that the king not build up wealth and power and all these other marks of status that would cause him to lift up his heart over his people. Similar warnings were given by Samuel in 1 Samuel chapter 8 concerning the behaviour of the king that they would set over them. If they were not careful, they would be fighting his battles rather than him fighting theirs. The faithful king was to be characterised by humility. He would act in the name of the Lord with the Lord's authority, but in a way that served and built up the people. Rehoboam heard the advice of the old men who had counseled Solomon, but ultimately took the advice of the men who had grown up with him. He was 41 when he began to reign, as we discover in chapter 14 verse 21. So these were not young men. They were in middle age. He behaves like Pharaoh, increasing their load on account of their complaint. Rehoboam sees kingship as a sort of a phallic contest. He suggests that his harshness is proof that his is bigger than his father's waist.

Rehoboam talks tough, but when he sends the chief of the forced labour, Adoram, to the northern tribes, he is stoned, and Rehoboam has to flee south to Jerusalem. Rehoboam's bravado proves counterproductive.

He ends up losing most of the power that he sought to gain. Rather than successfully intimidating Israel, he ends up losing his rule. All of this, we discover, was determined by the Lord, to fulfil the

word that was given to Ahijah in the preceding chapter. However, Rehoboam and the men of Judah were forbidden to fight against the Israelites. They were supposed to recognise that they were brothers. Solomon's sin had been similar to the sin of Adam in Genesis, the sin in the garden, and following that sin, there was the story of Cain and Abel. Israel comes to the brink of a very ugly repetition of this sin, as Rehoboam responded to the Lord's rejection of his rule by seeking to initiate a sanguinary war between brothers, gathering men to fight against the northern tribes. Although the people were saved from such a disaster by the word of Shemaiah, the prophet of the Lord, the brother nations were divided, and Jeroboam the son of Nebat became the ruler of the northern kingdom.

While Rehoboam is like Pharaoh, Jeroboam might initially seem like an amalgam of characters such as Joseph, Moses, Israel, and David. In chapter 11, he is the one who is a descendant of Joseph, who rises to prominence and service. He is appointed as the successor to an unfaithful king by a prophet of the Lord. He flees to Egypt. He returns to Israel after Solomon is dead. All of this most reminds us of the story of David, but also has echoes of the story of Moses and of Joseph. If Jeroboam repeats themes of the story of Moses and the Exodus, calling for his people to be let go, in power in the north, Jeroboam proceeds to repeat the great sin of the Exodus.

[10:33] In order to establish a distinct cult in the north, he wants to prevent his people from defecting to Rehoboam. And so he establishes two golden calves, declaring that they were the gods who brought Israel out of Egypt. This is repeating the sin of Aaron and the people in chapter 32 of Exodus.

He copies and he doubles the sin of Aaron and the people. And like Aaron, he builds an altar next to the calf at Bethel and declares a feast. He also installs a non-Levitical priesthood.

Reminders of Aaron and his sin can also be seen in the fact that Jeroboam has two sons, sons named Nadab and Abijah. We see this in chapter 14 verses 1 and 20. The two sons of Aaron killed by the Lord for their profane fire in Leviticus chapter 10 were called Nadab and Abihu. Once again, the distorted Exodus themes serve to reveal just how bad Israel's situation has become.

A question to consider. How might Jeroboam, Rehoboam, Israel and Judah have responded more faithfully to the breach that the Lord established in the kingdom?