

Precedents for the tragic story of a divided Israel were set long before the arrogant choices of Solomon's son, Rehoboam, and his rival, Jeroboam. Under the first two kings, Saul and David, Israel remained conscious of their identity and tribal land allotments. Saul's inauguration as a warrior king had loosely united the tribes against the Philistines and other enemies. When Saul died, David was made king at Hebron by his own tribe, Judah, but struggled with the house of Saul ("Israel," the other tribes) for seven years before they confirmed his rule over them (2 Samuel 3:1, 6, 17; 5:1-5). Much later in David's reign, the cry, "Every man to his tents, Israel," was shouted by Sheba ben Bichri to reject an aging David's leadership, exemplifying the other tribes' separateness from Judah (2 Samuel 20:1-22).

This Israel-Judah distinction was further magnified when Solomon levied taxes and forced all the tribes into labor except Judah (1 Kings 4:7-19; 5:26-32). Solomon became like Pharaoh, using his people, especially non-Judahites, to support his huge household and to establish cities, forts, and trade with other peoples. Judah was favored and Israel was afflicted, even to the extent that some of Israel's territories were given to Hiram of Tyre (1 Kings 9:10-14).

The most critical crack in the ostensibly united kingdom under Solomon was created by Solomon's idolatry and apostasy. He turned away from his early humble dependence upon YHWH (1 Kings 3) to worship other gods (1 Kings 11:1-8). YHWH warned Solomon that most of the kingdom would be torn from his son and given to Jeroboam (1 Kings 11:9-12, 26-39).

And yet, in 1 Kings 12, "all Israel" came to Shechem to install Rehoboam as king after Solomon died. Situated in the narrow pass between mounts Gerizim and Ebal, Shechem is now Tel Balata, near Nablus and the home of a small community of Samaritans. This confirmation outside of Jerusalem was necessary, given the strength of the northern tribes and their historic identity as separate from Judah.

Israel brought a critical question for Rehoboam. As the condition for their continued support of the Davidic dynasty, they asked Rehoboam to lighten their hard service, the heavy yoke his father had laid upon them. Rehoboam shrewdly asked for time to consider their demand, but he did not turn to YHWH or prophets. Rehoboam first consulted the elders who had stood before his father as advisors. They attempted to

teach Rehoboam diplomacy by wisely pointing out that Israel would be his servants forever if he would be a servant to them today. They advised him to give them good words. The elders' answer indicates that they may have opposed Solomon's policy of consistently exacting a heavy toll from his subjects, and they knew this answer would please Israel and retain kingdom unity. The elders saw the discontent of Israel and knew that Rehoboam must ease their burdens in order to retain them as subjects. It is clear the writer approved of this consultation.

Rehoboam, however, rejected this advice; he turned to "boys," those who had grown up with him. The narrator shows his contempt for the king's young friends by repeating the phrase: "the children who had grown up with him." These inexperienced youth prepared for Rehoboam a harsh answer to Israel's request that their yoke of service be lightened: "My littleness" or "my little thing" (New International Version "little finger") is thicker than my father's loins (waist or genitals). The obvious meaning is: "My father's yoke was heavy, but I will add to it! His whips were brutal; mine will be worse." Their contempt for their elders and their northern kin is clear, and their answer spurned the elders who urged Rehoboam to become a servant to the people of Israel as a welcome—necessary— respite from his father's policies, which amounted to near slavery. Solomon had effectively brought his people back to the house of bondage, from which YHWH had delivered them with mighty signs and wonders. Rehoboam had the opportunity to become a servant-king but chose to require even harsher service than Solomon had established.

Once Israel rebelled and selected Jeroboam as their king, Rehoboam assembled a large force to restore unity. But Shemaiah, a man of God, brought an oracle of YHWH to Rehoboam, *son of Solomon*, a reminder that underscores Solomon's foundational role in the division of the kingdom and Rehoboam decision to also act as despot ruler. Shemaiah's oracle forbade Judah and Benjamin to fight their brothers, the people of Israel. They obeyed, an unusual response to most prophets, and turned from civil war at this time.

Israel's choice of Jeroboam fulfilled Deuteronomy 17:14-20, the legislation for acquiring a king. He was a king whom YHWH and Israel had chosen; he was one of their brothers, not a foreigner. Unlike Solomon, he did not acquire horses, wives, or silver. YHWH promised Jeroboam an enduring house if he would listen, do right, and walk in God's ways (1 Kings 11: 37-39). Nonetheless, fearful of losing the loyalty of Israel, he built golden calves in Bethel and Dan, and thus made Israel to sin (1 Kings 12:29-33).

Jeroboam “forgot” the promises of Yahweh and was anxious to retain, through his own efforts, what had been given to him by God. This promise for good was overturned, just as God relents from threatening prophecies when people repent.

The tension between prophecy and human free will is apparent. As in many places in the Bible, prophecy is a warning that does not have to happen if people repent and choose a different path. God is always waiting to respond to those who humbly change their ways. See the book of Jonah! Rehoboam went on to build high places and other abominations, continuing the evil that Solomon brought into the kingdom of God (1 Kings 14:21-31). Had Rehoboam been a servant ruler, listening to his elders, easing the burdens Solomon had levied against his kin; had he rejected Solomon’s Pharaoh-like policies and returned to the rules for a king issued in Deuteronomy 17:14-20, God may have relented from punishing Solomon’s dynasty, as God did for the Ninevites in Jonah and when Ahab repented (1 Kings 21:17-29). Rehoboam could have taken to heart the wisdom of his elders, returned to the ways of righteousness, trusted in God’s mercy and possibly averted the disaster that unfolded. We see many examples of God’s mercy in this regard throughout Scripture and upon this mercy we also rely.

Living God, in whom there is no shadow or change,  
we thank you for the gift of life eternal,  
and for all those who, having served you well,  
now rest from their labors.

We thank you for all the saints remembered and forgotten,  
for those dear souls most precious to us.  
Today we give thanks for those who have died and entered into glory.

We bless you for their life and love,  
and rejoice for them “all is well,  
and all manner of things will be well.”

God of Jesus and our God,  
mindful of all those choice souls who have gone on ahead of us,  
teach us, and each twenty-first century disciple of every race and place,  
to follow their example to the best of our ability:  
to feed the poor in body or spirit,  
to support and comfort the mourners and the repentant,  
to encourage the meek and stand with them in crises,

to affirm those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,  
to cherish and learn from the merciful,  
to be humbled by, and stand with, the peacemakers.

Let us clearly recognize what it means  
to be called the children of God,  
and to know we are to be your saints  
neither by our own inclination nor  
in our own strength  
but simply by the call  
and the healing holiness  
of Christ Jesus our Savior. **Amen!**