

# *The Way of the Fool*

## WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

2<sup>nd</sup> in a six-part series drawn from the book of Kings

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*1 Kings 12:1-19 (NIV)*

Rehoboam went to Shechem, for all Israel had gone there to make him king. <sup>2</sup>When Jeroboam son of Nebat heard this (he was still in Egypt, where he had fled from King Solomon), he returned from Egypt. <sup>3</sup>So they sent for Jeroboam, and he and the whole assembly of Israel went to Rehoboam and said to him: <sup>4</sup>“Your father put a heavy yoke on us, but now lighten the harsh labor and the heavy yoke he put on us, and we will serve you.”

<sup>5</sup>Rehoboam answered, “Go away for three days and then come back to me.” So the people went away.

<sup>6</sup>Then King Rehoboam consulted the elders who had served his father Solomon during his lifetime. “How would you advise me to answer these people?” he asked.

<sup>7</sup>They replied, “If today you will be a servant to these people and serve them and give them a favorable answer, they will always be your servants.”

<sup>8</sup>But Rehoboam rejected the advice the elders gave him and consulted the young men who had grown up with him and were serving him. <sup>9</sup>He asked them, “What is your advice? How should we answer these people who say to me, ‘Lighten the yoke your father put on us?’”

<sup>10</sup>The young men who had grown up with him replied, “These people have said to you, ‘Your father put a heavy yoke on us, but make our yoke lighter.’ Now tell them, ‘My little finger is thicker than my father’s waist. <sup>11</sup>My father laid on you a heavy yoke; I will make it even heavier. My father scourged you with whips; I will scourge you with scorpions.’”

<sup>12</sup>Three days later Jeroboam and all the people returned to Rehoboam, as the king had said, “Come back to me in three days.” <sup>13</sup>The king answered the people harshly. Rejecting the advice given him by the elders, <sup>14</sup>he followed the advice of the young men and said, “My father made your yoke heavy; I will make it even heavier. My father scourged you with whips; I will scourge you with scorpions.” <sup>15</sup>So the king did not listen to the people, for this turn of events was from the LORD, to fulfill the word the LORD had spoken to Jeroboam son of Nebat through Ahijah the Shilonite.

<sup>16</sup>When all Israel saw that the king refused to listen to them, they answered the king:

“What share do we have in David,  
what part in Jesse’s son?

To your tents, Israel!

Look after your own house, David!”

So the Israelites went home. <sup>17</sup>But as for the Israelites who were living in the towns of Judah, Rehoboam still ruled over them.

<sup>18</sup>King Rehoboam sent out Adoniram, who was in charge of forced labor, but all Israel stoned him to death. King Rehoboam, however, managed to get into his chariot and escape to Jerusalem. <sup>19</sup>So Israel has been in rebellion against the house of David to this day.

*From Solomon the wise (at least sometimes) to Rehoboam the fool.*

There are many ways we can be foolish. We can be rash when we should be patient. We can be confrontational when we should be seeking peace. We can avoid the elderly and take advice only from the young, the hip, and the cool. In all these ways and more Rehoboam, the son of King Solomon, played the fool. Yet Rehoboam’s foolishness paled in comparison to that of Jeroboam, who embraced the way of the fool, the traitor, rather than the way of God. This is their story.

*A chance encounter? (1 Kings 11:26-40)*

The horse labored as Jeroboam pushed him harder and harder. There was no particular reason for the pace, but Jeroboam was wealthy and powerful and imagined that his time was valuable beyond measure. As he rounded the bend near Shiloh, he pulled the horse up short. Blocking the roadway was an old man that Jeroboam thought he recognized. It looked that wild old self-proclaimed prophet from Shiloh. His name was something like Ahujoh;<sup>1</sup> Jeroboam couldn’t really remember. But when the old man motioned to him,

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<sup>1</sup> We’re told in 1 Kings 11 that the prophet’s name was actually Ahijah. Also, I don’t really know that he was old. I just always think of them that way!

Jeroboam climbed down and walked over. To his surprise, the prophet took a step toward forward and removed the cloak he was wearing. Standing stone-still, Jeroboam gaped as the old man tore the cloak into twelve pieces and put ten pieces in the younger man's hands.

But it was when the old man spoke, that Jeroboam thought he had crossed over into some unearthly realm. The prophet told him that God was taking ten tribes away from Solomon and giving them over to Jeroboam. As his head reeled, the prophet told him why. Solomon had led the people of God in the worship of idols and detestable foreign gods; now, much of his kingdom would be taken away. Not all of it, for the tribes of Joseph and Simeon<sup>2</sup> would remain in Solomon's household. And as for Jeroboam? The word of the Lord God was that so long as Jeroboam remained obedient, God would be with him and he would prosper. God would build for Jeroboam "a dynasty as enduring as the one I built for David." All Jeroboam had to do was to pursue God's way. That's all.

As Jeroboam rode away, thoughts and emotions thundered around the inside of his skull. Why me? Why me? What had I done to deserve such a thing? . . . then again, why *not* me? I'm smart and successful. Solomon himself appreciated my abilities (v. 28). . . . Indeed, why not me.

When Jeroboam reached his home in Ephraim, he hurriedly began to cobble together an alliance against Solomon. Jeroboam wanted to get on with it. If it was to be rebellion (and surely that this what the old prophet had in mind . . . surely), then let it be sooner than later. God was with him . . . right?

When King Solomon heard what Jeroboam was up to, he dispatched soldiers to find Jeroboam and drag him back to Jerusalem. But Jeroboam ran . . . all the way to Egypt, where he stayed. What had gone wrong? Perhaps the old man was just a crazy old fool.

#### *Solomon*

After dealing with Jeroboam's aborted rebellion, Solomon continued to reign until his death after forty years on the throne. He was buried in Jerusalem and was succeeded by his son, Rehoboam.

#### *Rehoboam*

We can be sure that everyone had high hopes for Rehoboam. The tribes had been united in a single kingdom for nearly a century. But when the northern tribes invited Jeroboam to return from Egypt and join them in their discussions with the new king, foreboding clouds rolled in.

The tribes met with Rehoboam and told him that his father, Solomon, had laid very heavy burdens on them, both in labor and in taxes. If Rehoboam would only lighten their load, they would serve him and the united kingdom would move forward.

Rehoboam decided to seek counsel about the decision the tribes had set before him. He went first to the elders who had served Solomon. These were the old hands, the experienced sages who had wielded power under the dead king. They told Rehoboam straight out – give the tribes what they want, be a servant to them.

But Rehoboam didn't much like their advice, so he turned to the younger hands, hoping to get the answer he wanted. They urged Rehoboam to tell the tribes that if they thought things were tough under Solomon, just wait . . . the burdens will be much heavier under Rehoboam. Dad may have used whips; Rehoboam would use scorpions (12:11).

Sadly, Rehoboam listened to the young men. When the tribal leaders gathered, the new king told them that their yoke may have been heavy, but he would make it heavier.

And that was it . . . so much lost from a single rash and unwise decision.

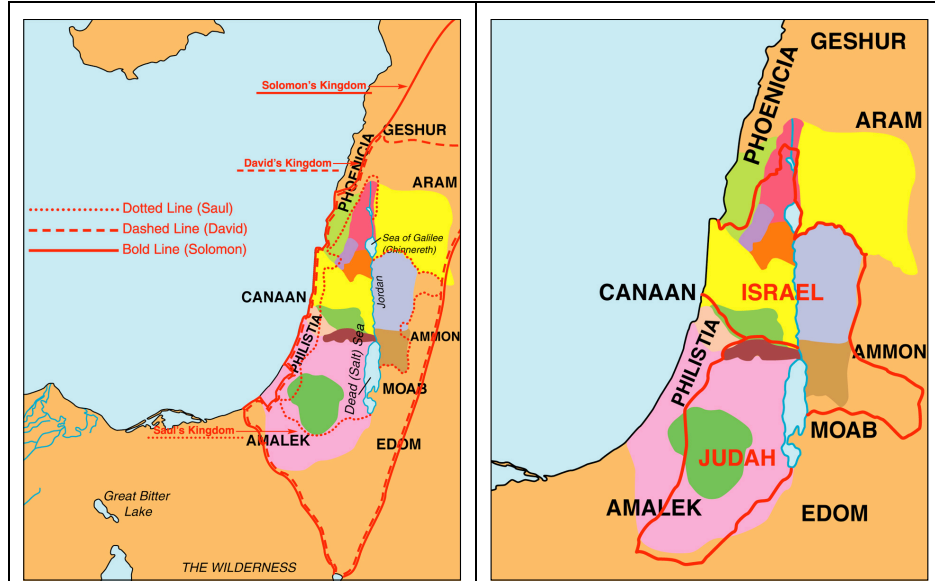
The king wouldn't listen to the tribes and so they left. They went home in every sense of the word. "Look after your own house!" they shouted. And the united kingdom of Israel was no more. There would now be two kingdoms comprised of Israelites: the kingdom of Israel in

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<sup>2</sup> In practice, the tribe of Simeon had been absorbed into Judah, which was the largest and wealthiest of the tribes that made up the kingdom of Israel.

the north (the ten tribes) and the kingdom of Judah in the south (Judah and the remains of Simeon).

The year is 922 BC. Here are maps showing the before and after of Rehoboam's decision:



Gene Rice offers the following perspective on Rehoboam's foolishness:

Rehoboam's behavior is a classic example of arrogant power. He and his youthful advisors are indignant at the thought that the governed have rights. They view governmental power as the king's personal prerogative to be imposed at will. The stoning of Adoram and the threatening anger toward Rehoboam reveal how deep-seated were Israel's grievances. By ignoring this and rejecting the counsel of his older advisors, Rehoboam emerges as insensitive, arrogant, foolhardy, and politically stupid.

While human folly played its part in the breakup of the kingdom, ultimately "it was a turn of affairs brought about by the LORD" (v. 15). This is not to say that God caused Rehoboam to act as he did. There were many ways Ahijah's prophecy could have been fulfilled. As Joseph's brothers meant their treatment of Joseph for evil but God meant it for good (Gen. 50:20), so Rehoboam's free act is integrated into divine providence.

How great was the promise of Israel in the days of Solomon! As the most powerful kingdom in Palestine-Syria, with the temple built and worship flourishing, the conditions were ideal for Israel to make their witness felt. As Samson squandered his great strength, so Israel squandered their great opportunity. The matter-of-fact manner in which this failing is treated must be because the narrator knows how endemic such failings are among the people of God.<sup>3</sup>

And Jeroboam? Yes, he becomes the king of the new northern kingdom of Israel, but he too embraces the worship of idols, as he wanted to give the northern tribes an alternative to sacrifices at the temple in Jerusalem, which was the capital of Judah. And he offered the people golden calves. Jeroboam's story continues in 1 Kings 13-14. He ruled over Israel for more than twenty years – but he would be remembered as a bad king, for he had led the Israelites of the northern tribes away from the worship of the God-Who-Is.

In the biblical view, a wise person is one who pursues God's way. A fool is one who does not. It isn't really more complicated than that. And what is God's way – genuinely and concretely loving God and loving others each and every day. Really. That's it.

<sup>3</sup> Rice, G. (1990). Nations under God: a commentary on the book of 1 Kings. International Theological Commentary (pp. 101–102). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans.

## Reflections on the story of Rehoboam and Jeroboam

by Richard D. Nelson (from his commentary in the *Interpretation* series)

Jeroboam therefore plays the role of the king who is the author of sin, a paradigm of wickedness by which later kings are measured. In this he is the opposite of David, who is the paradigm of the pious king. Later in the book, Manasseh and Josiah will play opposite each other in analogous roles. In this, the author is following a Near Eastern ideological convention. Naram-Sin fulfilled the role of the paradigmatically wicked king in Mesopotamian literary culture for fifteen hundred years, based on his desecration of the temple of Enlil in Nippur. A later example is Nabonidus, who became a paradigm of royal impiety as a result of his interruption of the Akitu festival (ANET, pp. 312–15, 315–16).

The summary verse 32 and the transitional verse 33 point on to chapter 13, which will etch this sin and Bethel's ultimate fate into the consciousness of the reader. These calves will reappear as reminders of the ongoing apostasy of the North: in a judgment on Jehu in 2 Kings 10:29 and as a parallel to the sinful worship of Baal/Asherah in 2 Kings 17:16. The sin of Jeroboam will echo and re-echo through the evaluations of each king of the Northern Kingdom.

It might be tempting to read this chapter solely as a political story, as the triumph of a liberation movement against oppressive totalitarianism. That is certainly how the chapter begins. Rehoboam is the dictatorial fool who forgets that government's role is to serve its people (v. 7). Israel is standing up for a more humane position of traditional values (vv. 4, 16). Similar dramas are being played out by liberation movements around the world, often with the support of the church and its theologians.

Yet this chapter pushes beyond the political story to a theological one. The cause of this rebellion is not just human dissatisfaction with an oppressive system but the fulfillment of God's word and God's will to punish. As the story finishes, Rehoboam the foolish oppressor ends up as the obedient king. In contrast, Jeroboam the liberator of his people, who is searching desperately for religious authentication for his populist revolution, ends up as the paradigm for all royal apostasy.

Perhaps Christians who are too willing to provide religious legitimacy to an oppressive status quo ought to take the first part of this story to heart (vv. 1–20). Perhaps Christians who uncritically offer the church's blessing to all liberation movements need to remember the rest of the story (vv. 21–32). Neither group dare forget that, in the final analysis, God's sovereign will is being worked out in these historical struggles (v. 15).

### Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. The book of Kings is divided into two books in our English Bibles. But it is a single work, telling the story of the kings of Judah and Israel over several centuries. These stories are often richly told and are timeless in the human foibles they portray. Take Jeroboam for instance:
  1. Why do you think he rebelled against Solomon after hearing what the old prophet had to say?
  2. How often do we behave rashly, when waiting patiently would have served us better? God certainly never told Jeroboam to rebel against Solomon.
2. Rehoboam too. Perhaps he was simply a rash and foolish young man. In any event, he advice-shopped until he got what he wanted. In today's vernacular, he sought out the "yes-men" or, in this case, the "yes-boys." Why are we so often reluctant to hear advice we don't like? Why are "yes-man" eternally popular? Why don't we know better?
3. And this worship of idols. Solomon, Jeroboam, and most of the kings that came after them led the people in the worship of false gods. The consequences were inevitably disastrous. Why would this be so? What is it about this practice that epitomized the way of the fool? How would you pull this aspect of the stories into our own day?

## Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p><b>Monday, 1 Kings 11-12:24</b> Solomon's folly; threats to the throne; Jeroboam's short-lived rebellion; Rehoboam and the division of the kingdom</p>	<p><b>Tuesday, 1 Kings 12:25-14:20</b> The story of Jeroboam, the first king of the new Israel</p>
<p><b>Wednesday, 1 Kings 14:21-15:24</b> Rehoboam of Israel; Abijah of Judah; Asa of Judah</p>	<p><b>Thursday, 1 Kings 15:25-16:14</b> Nadab, Basha, and Elah – all kings of Israel</p>
<p><b>Friday, 1 Kings 16:15 – 16:34</b> Zimri, Omri, and Ahab – all kings of Israel</p>	<p><b>Weekly Joys and Concerns</b></p>

