

# FIRST KINGS

## Chapter 12

### *Israel Rebels Against Rehoboam*

Rehoboam went to Shechem, for all the Israelites 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, “Tell these people who have said to you, ‘Your father put a heavy yoke on us, but make our yoke lighter’—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, O Israel! Look after your own house, O 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. <sup>20</sup> When all the Israelites heard that Jeroboam had returned, they sent and called him to the assembly and made him king over all Israel. Only the tribe of Judah remained loyal to the house of David. <sup>21</sup> When Rehoboam arrived in Jerusalem, he mustered the whole house of Judah and the tribe of Benjamin—a hundred and eighty thousand fighting men—to make war against the house of Israel and to regain the kingdom for Rehoboam son of Solomon. <sup>22</sup> But this word of God came to Shemaiah the man of God: <sup>23</sup> “Say to Rehoboam son of Solomon king of Judah, to

**the whole house of Judah and Benjamin, and to the rest of the people,** <sup>24</sup> **‘This is what the LORD says: Do not go up to fight against your brothers, the Israelites. Go home, every one of you, for this is my doing.’ ” So they obeyed the word of the LORD and went home again, as the LORD had ordered.**

**12:1–20** Predicted division of the kingdom became reality when negotiations with Solomon’s son Rehoboam proved futile (v 16). At Shechem, the 10 northern tribes, henceforth called “Israel,” severed political ties with Judah, electing Jeroboam to be their king (v 20). Until the Northern Kingdom was overrun by the Assyrians two centuries later, Israel remained a house divided against itself. With the exception of an interlude of about three decades, the separated brethren were so hostile to one another that they engaged in civil war. At times, they even sought and obtained foreign military aid against one another. (TLSB)

**12:1** *Shechem*. A city of great historical significance located in the hill country of northern Ephraim (see Ge 12:6; 33:18–20; Jos 8:30–35 and note on Jos 8:30; see also Jos 20:7; 21:21; 24:1–33). (CSB)

Chief city of Ephraim, c 30 mi N of Jerusalem, where Joshua made a covenant with “all the tribes of Israel” (Jsh 24:1). Nearby were Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim (Jsh 8:30–33). (TLSB)

*all the Israelites*. That is, representatives of the northern tribes (see v. 16). The fact that David became king over the northern tribes on the basis of a covenant (see 2Sa 5:3) suggests that their act of submission was to be renewed with each new king and that it was subject to negotiation. (CSB)

**12:2** *heard this*. Heard about the death of Solomon (11:43). (CSB)

*returned from Egypt*. See 2Ch 10:2. (CSB)

**12:4** *put a heavy yoke on us*. Smoldering discontent with Solomon’s heavy taxation and conscription of labor and military forces flared up into strong expression (see 4:7, 22–23, 27–28; 5:13–14; 9:22; see also notes on 9:15; 11:28). Conditions had progressively worsened since the early days of Solomon’s rule (see 4:20). (CSB)

**12:6** *took counsel*. Monarchy depended on the tribal leaders’ support. Rehoboam negotiated with “all the assembly of Israel” (v 3) for his succession to the throne. Cf 1Sm 11:14–15; 2Sm 5:1–3 for Saul’s and David’s popular acclamation. (TLSB)

*elders who had served his father Solomon*. Officials of Solomon’s government such as Adoniram (4:6) and the district governors (4:7–19). (CSB)

Elders were the preferred counselors. (TLSB)

**12:7** *be a servant . . . serve them*. Elders do not explicitly tell him to give people what they request, but they suggest that he look out for the people’s best interest. (TLSB)

Authority in the kingdom of God is for service, not for personal aggrandizement. (CSB)

**12:8** *young men.* Young in comparison to the officials who had served Solomon. Rehoboam was 41 years old when he became king (14:21). (CSB)

*servicing him.* Apparently Rehoboam had quickly established new administrative positions for friends and associates of his own generation. (CSB)

Apparently, Rehoboam had given administrative positions to his young friends. In deliberating on the request to lighten the yoke given by his father, Rehoboam received opposite advice from two groups of counselors (vv 6–11). (TLSB)

**12:10** *My little finger is thicker than my father's waist.* A proverb claiming that Rehoboam's weakest measures will be far stronger than his father's strongest measures. (CSB)

**12:11** *scorpions.* Metal-spiked leather lashes. Not only will governmental burdens on the people be increased, but the punishment for not complying with the government's directives will also be intensified. (CSB)

Scourges, named after a dreaded animal. They may have had many lashes, each carrying a piece of metal at its end. (TLSB)

**12:14** *followed the advice of the young men.* Rehoboam's answer reflects a despotic spirit completely contrary to the covenantal character of Israelite kingship (see Dt 17:14–20; see also note on 1Sa 10:25). (CSB)

**12:15** *the king did not listen to the people.* Though Israel was not democratic, political power lay in the hands of tribal representatives who listened to the clans and families they served. (TLSB)

*this turn of events was from the LORD.* By this statement the writer of Kings does not condone either the foolish act of Rehoboam or the revolutionary spirit of the northern tribes, but he reminds the reader that all these things occurred to bring about the divinely announced punishment on the house of David for Solomon's idolatry and breach of the covenant (11:9–13). For the relationship between divine sovereignty over all things and human responsibility for evil acts see note on 2Sa 24:1. (CSB)

Though unseen and often uninvited, the Lord of the nations still is present at councils on all levels of diplomacy. His "hand is not shortened" in directing the world's history (Is 59:1; 50:2; Nu 11:23). (TLSB)

*the word the LORD had spoken to Jeroboam ... through Ahijah.* See 11:29–39. (CSB)

Though God did not make Rehoboam and his followers do evil, their actions brought on the judgment God had pronounced on Solomon's house (1Ki 11:29–39). Chem: "Just as God bound

the devil ‘with chains of darkness,’ 2 Peter 2:4, and treated him like a mad dog, ... pulling him back or turning him in another direction; so He hinders many choices and decisions of the ungodly. He changes many of their plans and upsets them. He sets limits to their attempts and turns them elsewhere either for the sake of the church or that they may find deliverance for themselves” (*LTh* 1:200). (TLSB)

**12:1–15** Solomon’s son Rehoboam foolishly alienates many of the people by laying on them a heavier burden of hard labor than his father had. Rehoboam’s arrogance is a warning. When we shut our minds and hearts to the advice of others—and especially to God’s inspired Word—we invite disaster. Our greatest asset in life’s struggle is God’s Word for wisdom, forgiveness, and renewal in Christ. • Mighty Judge, we come before You with deep awe. Spare us unworthy sinners from the judgment we so justly deserve. In our Savior’s name we ask this. Amen. (TLSB)

**12:16** *all Israel*. The northern tribes (see note on v. 1). (CSB)

*To your tents*. Shout of rebellion, raised by Israel at David’s time. Cf 1Sm 11:8; 2Sm 2:8–10 for examples of long-standing differences between the northern tribes and Judah. Luth: “Rehoboam ... ruined everything, and his kingdom was cut into two parts. But this does not happen only in external and political affairs ... but also in religion and in the Word of God. The descendants always neglect the purity of the doctrine handed down to them by the fathers and look for something new. This is what is now being done by those who, after the Gospel has once more become known, are not content with the purity of faith and the doctrine of the Gospel but are stirring up new controversies” (AE 15:43). (TLSB)

*David*. The Davidic dynasty (see 2Sa 20:1 for an earlier expression of the same sentiment).

**12:17** *Israelites who were living in the towns of Judah*. People originally from the northern tribes who had settled in Judah. They were later to be joined by others from the north who desired to serve the Lord and worship at the temple (see 2Ch 11:16–17). (CSB)

**12:18** *Adoniram, who was in charge of forced labor*. He had served in the same capacity under both David (2Sa 20:24) and Solomon (1Ki 4:6; 5:14). (CSB)

Rehoboam flaunted his authority before the people by sending to them the very man to whose office they objected so vehemently (2Sm 20:24). Spelled Hadoram in 2Ch 10:18. (TLSB)

*forced labor*. Given Israel’s past slavery in Egypt, one can easily see why they rejected the continuing encroachment on their freedoms. (TLSB)

*all Israel stoned him*. Hyperbole. Describes broad revulsion to Rehoboam’s policy. (TLSB)

**12:19** *this day*. The time of the writing of the source from which the author of 1 Kings derived this account (see Introduction: Author, Sources and Date). (CSB)

Reference to author's source. The account of the rebellion was likely written while both kingdoms were in existence, prior to 722 BC, when the northern tribes became an Assyrian vassal state. (TLSB)

**12:21** *tribe of Benjamin*. Although the bulk of Benjamin was aligned with the northern tribes (see note on 11:31–32), the area around Jerusalem remained under Rehoboam's control (as did the Gibeonite cities and Gezer). The northern boundary of Judah must have reached almost to Bethel (12 miles north of Jerusalem)—which Abijah, Rehoboam's son, even held for a short while (see 2Ch 13:19). (CSB)

Most of Benjamin went with the northern tribes, but the region around Jerusalem remained under Rehoboam. (TLSB)

*a hundred and eighty thousand fighting men*. Probably includes all support personnel together with those who would actually be committed to battle. (CSB)

**12:22** *Shemaiah*. Wrote a history of Rehoboam's reign (2Ch 12:15). Another of his prophecies is recorded in 2Ch 12:5–8. (CSB)

Prophets could act as counselors to the kings (e.g., Nathan in 1:22–27). (TLSB)

*man of God*. A common way of referring to a prophet (see, e.g., 13:1; Dt 18:18; 33:1; 1Sa 2:27; 9:9–10). (CSB)

**12:23** *rest of the people*. See note on v. 17. (CSB)

**12:24** *not ... fight*. Heir to his father's military power, Rehoboam may have been able to force Israel to submit. The "continual wars," mentioned in 2Ch 12:15, were more in the nature of border skirmishes. (TLSB)

*they listened*. To their credit, Rehoboam and the people listened to Shemaiah, whose word prevailed among the king's counselors. The "word of the LORD" forbade Rehoboam to use force to try to restore the union. (TLSB)

*went home again*. Although full-scale civil war was averted, intermittent skirmishes and battles between Israel and Judah continued throughout the reigns of Rehoboam, Abijah and Asa, until political instability in Israel after the death of Baasha finally brought the conflict to a halt. Asa's son Jehoshaphat entered into an alliance with Ahab and sealed the relationship by the marriage of his son Jehoram to Ahab's daughter Athaliah (see 14:30; 15:6, 16; 22:2, 44; 2Ki 8:18). (CSB)

**12:16–24** Rehoboam's foolish and sinful attitude divides the kingdom, making Jeroboam king of the northern tribes. When the leaders of the new Israel, the Church, turn from God's guidance,

they invite calamity and ruin. The great Lord of history uses past examples to work repentance in us. He breaks into history, applying mercy through our gracious Savior. • Lord of heavenly hosts, You hold the nations as but dust upon the scales. I trust in Your almighty power. In the Savior's name, I bring before You all my needs. Amen. (TLSB)

### ***Golden Calves at Bethel and Dan***

**25** Then Jeroboam fortified Shechem in the hill country of Ephraim and lived there. From there he went out and built up Peniel.<sup>26</sup> Jeroboam thought to himself, “The kingdom will now likely revert to the house of David.”<sup>27</sup> If these people go up to offer sacrifices at the temple of the LORD in Jerusalem, they will again give their allegiance to their lord, Rehoboam king of Judah. They will kill me and return to King Rehoboam.”<sup>28</sup> After seeking advice, the king made two golden calves. He said to the people, “It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem. Here are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.”<sup>29</sup> One he set up in Bethel, and the other in Dan.<sup>30</sup> And this thing became a sin; the people went even as far as Dan to worship the one there.<sup>31</sup> Jeroboam built shrines on high places and appointed priests from all sorts of people, even though they were not Levites.<sup>32</sup> He instituted a festival on the fifteenth day of the eighth month, like the festival held in Judah, and offered sacrifices on the altar. This he did in Bethel, sacrificing to the calves he had made. And at Bethel he also installed priests at the high places he had made.<sup>33</sup> On the fifteenth day of the eighth month, a month of his own choosing, he offered sacrifices on the altar he had built at Bethel. So he instituted the festival for the Israelites and went up to the altar to make offerings.

**12:25** *built Shechem.* Jeroboam fortified the city (v 1). (TLSB)

*Peniel.* A town in Transjordan (see Ge 32:31; Jdg 8:9, 17) of strategic importance for defense against the Arameans of Damascus (see 11:23–25) and the Ammonites. (CSB)

On the Jabbok River, east of the Jordan (Gn 32:30–31; Jgs 8:8). (TLSB)

**12:26** *revert to the house of David.* Jeroboam did not have confidence in the divine promise given to him through Ahijah (see 11:38) and thus took action that forfeited the theocratic basis for his kingship. (CSB)

**12:27** *turn again.* Jeroboam recognized the importance of religion in state affairs and hoped to curb the influence of the priests and Levites centered in Jerusalem. (TLSB)

**12:28** *took counsel.* Rather than consulting the Lord's prophet, Jeroboam likely received the counsel of those corrupted by false worship, which Solomon had tolerated. “If people are allowed to set up religious rites, and through these rites merit grace, the religious rites of all the pagans will have to be approved.... The religious rites of the pagans and the Israelites were rejected for the very reason that they believed they merited forgiveness of sins and righteousness by these rites. Yet they did not know the righteousness of faith” (Ap XV 15–16). “It should be

the first care of kings to advance God’s glory. It would be very shameful for them to use their influence and power to confirm idolatry” (Tr 54). (TLSB)

*two golden calves.* Pagan gods of the Arameans and Canaanites were often represented as standing on calves or bulls as symbols of their strength and fertility (see note on Jdg 2:13). (CSB)

A small, bronze, bull figure (c 7 in long) was found in the northern Samarian hills. (TLSB)

*Here are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.* Like Aaron (Ex 32:4–5), Jeroboam attempted to combine the pagan calf symbol with the worship of the Lord, though he attempted no physical representation of the Lord—no “god” stood on the backs of his bulls. (CSB)

Secession of the northern tribes severed religious as well as political ties. (TLSB)

*gods ... who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.* Jeroboam cleverly connected the theme of freedom from Egyptian slavery to the freedom from forced labor under Rehoboam. Luther: “So great is the perversity of the human heart that it accepts strange gods far more readily and eagerly than it maintains that this God, who has revealed Himself through His promises and signs, is truthful. How great a kindness it is that He has redeemed us through His Son!” (AE 4:146). (TLSB)

**12:29** Fearing that worship in Jerusalem would heal the breach, jeopardizing the entire movement and his own life, Jeroboam established two sanctuaries within the new state’s borders. These new religious centers were where veneration of graven images flourished at the time of the judges. (TLSB)

*Bethel.* Located about 12 miles north of Jerusalem close to the border of Ephraim but within the territory of Benjamin (Jos 18:11–13, 22). Bethel held a prominent place in the history of Israel’s worship of the Lord (see Ge 12:8; 28:11–19; 35:6–7; Jdg 20:26–28; 1Sa 7:16). (CSB)

Prominent OT center of worship in Ephraim’s hill country. (TLSB)

*Dan.* Located in the far north of the land near Mount Hermon. A similarly paganized worship was practiced here during the period of the judges (Jdg 18:30–31). Its “high place” has recently been excavated. (CSB)

City along Israel’s northern border. (TLSB)

**12:30** *this thing became a sin.* Jeroboam’s royal policy inevitably led to Israel’s violation of the first commandment (Ex 20:3–6) and opened the door for the entrance of fully pagan practices into Israel’s religious rites (especially in the time of Ahab). Jeroboam foolishly abandoned religious principle for political expediency and in so doing forfeited the promise given him by the prophet Ahijah (see 11:38). (CSB)

Idol worship brought destruction of the house of Jeroboam (13:33–34) and eventually of the entire Northern Kingdom (14:16). His successors are condemned as having “walked in all the way of Jeroboam the son of Nebat” (16:26). Cf 15:30; 16:7, 19. (TLSB)

**12:31** *Jeroboam built shrines on high places.* See note on 3:2. (CSB)

Local places of worship, which might have honored Yahweh, pagan deities, or both, now became state-approved sites—another step to decentralize worship. (TLSB)

*not Levites.* Many of the priests and Levites of the northern kingdom migrated to Judah because Jeroboam bypassed them when appointing cult personnel in the north (see 2Ch 11:13–14). (CSB)

*priests from among all the people.* Jeroboam undermined the authority of the Levites, who would have loyalties to their leaders in Jerusalem. (TLSB)

**12:32** *festival held in Judah.* Apparently the Feast of Tabernacles, observed in Judah on the 15th to the 21st of the seventh month (see 8:2; Lev 23:34). (CSB)

To wean the people from customary pilgrimages to Jerusalem, Jeroboam appointed a feast to be celebrated a month later than the Feast of Booths. (TLSB)

*offered sacrifices on the altar.* Jeroboam overstepped the limits of his prerogatives as king and assumed the role of a priest (see 2Ch 26:16–21). (CSB)

Jeroboam arrogated priestly functions to himself (13:1). (TLSB)

*he placed in Bethel the priests of the high places.* Organizing and headquartering of the new priestly order. (TLSB)

**12:25–33** Jeroboam sets up rival worship. By making golden calves and temples for the practice of idolatrous religion, he leads the people into sin. Today, we need to be aware of the subtle giving of our hearts to the idols of false religions, materialism, pleasure, and self-centeredness. The Lord turns us away from these traps and leads us to the worship of the true God, our Savior, who created the heavens and the earth. • Lord of history, through the study of Your Holy Word enable us to learn all that You would teach us. Give us godly wisdom to avoid the errors of the past and follow what is good and right. In Jesus’ name. Amen. (TLSB)