

**NATIONAL CONSEQUENCES OF  
LEADERS' CHOICES**  
**Teaching-Learning Resources**  
**BAPTIST LEADER**  
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**Background Scripture: 1 Kings 12:1–14:20**  
**Key Passage: 1 Kings 12:6–11, 26–30**

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This lesson initiates Part II, “Decisions That Shaped the Nations’ Future.” The two most positive decisions made in the nation’s beginning were unfortunately quickly abandoned. These were (1) the decision of David to hold inviolable the life of the king, since he was the messiah of Yahweh, the Lord’s anointed and (2) the decision of Solomon to administer the affairs of the realm on the basis of wisdom rather than political expediency.

One of the most costly decisions which emerged in the nation’s beginning was the decision to engage in holy war. This decision survived, though in a modified form: the older goal of war to annihilate all the living creatures of the enemy was abandoned so that the living prisoners of war could do the hard labor in Israel (1 Kings 9:20–21).

Solomon had few alien enemies (11:14, 21–26), and he was not an Israelite warlord. His father, David, had conquered all of the local enemies of Israel, both real or potential enemies. The rising influence of Egypt and Assyria, the two major world powers in the ancient Near East, precluded distant imperial ambitions in Israel. Solomon remained a man of peace, but many of his decisions were marked by an insensitivity to the nation’s low morale and financial limitations. This set the stage for rebellion among the tribes,

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and rebellion meant war. The post-Solomonic wars were perhaps more tragic than the Davidic and pre-Davidic wars. The wars that followed Solomon's reign were civil wars—it was all in the family!

The political events which led up to the division of the United Kingdom of Israel into the Northern Kingdom of Israel, composed of ten tribes, and the Southern Kingdom of Judah, composed of two tribes, are examined in today's study on "National Consequences of Leaders' Decisions." It is the first of five lessons in Part II of the larger study on "The Kingdom and the Early Prophets: God's Call to Responsible Decision."

### **The Biblical Setting**

Solomon requested and received more wisdom than he put into practice. The illustrious example of Solomon's judgment in the maternity suit of the two harlots was not typical of Solomon's political wisdom. Solomon's wisdom in judging people on domestic issues was incisive and sensitive; but his political decisions were harsh and shortsighted. His political decisions made it possible for him to maintain the peace but impossible to perpetuate the peace. Solomon's pursuit of wisdom and his exercise of wisdom were demonstrated by his coining and collecting proverbial sayings. This emphasis is indicated in 1 Kings 4:30–32: ". . . He [Solomon] also uttered three thousand proverbs; and his songs were a thousand and five." But the proclamation of proverbs is not the same thing as the practice of wisdom. Solomon shared the human weakness of not practicing what he preached.

Although Solomon was not a warrior, he undertook a massive and expensive program of rebuilding and extending

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Israel's defensive network. This was in addition to his building of the temple and royal palace. These building programs depleted the nation's wealth and health, and many Israelites may have been forced into slave labor. The biblical traditions are not quite clear on the question of Solomon's using Israelites as forced laborers. Although 1 Kings 9:22 states, "But of the people of Israel Solomon made no slaves," 1 Kings 5:13 indicates, "King Solomon raised a levy of forced labor out of all Israel; and the levy numbered thirty thousand men." The difference in the texts may be due to a change in policy over the years. But both texts indicate that Israelites were drafted—for military service or slave labor, possibly both. Solomon had few foreign enemies but many hostile people within his own kingdom.

In addition, Solomon was self-deceived in his decision to strengthen the nation by political marriages. Even though the text indicates, "Now King Solomon loved many foreign women" (11:1), it is hardly possible that Solomon loved all the women he married. According to 1 Kings 11:3, Solomon achieved a world record yet unchallenged by any contender for a place in the Guinness books of records, for he had 1,000 women in his personal life—700 princesses (i.e., wives) and 300 mistresses! The cost of such a royal harem was underwritten by the labors of tribal peasants and slave labor. Such extravagance aroused the ire of the people, not because of the sexual obsession and permissiveness practiced by the king but because of the financial and religious accommodation Solomon made for his women. Israelite labor was paying for idolatry in the royal court, for Solomon's "love" for his women demanded also an increasing amount of love for their deities.

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While Solomon basked in the international adulation over his wisdom and women, the citizens of Israel silently seethed in sweat and swearing. Rebellion was on their minds. They remembered in pain the warning of Samuel: “These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons. . . . He will take your daughters . . . . He will take . . . . He will take . . . and you shall be his slaves” (1 Samuel 8:11–17; compare Deuteronomy 17: 14–20). Common sense told every Israelite that Samuel had been correct. They had demanded a king and the king had done them in.

Solomon no doubt shared the opinion found in I Samuel 15:29, “. . . the Glory of Israel will not lie or repent; for he is not a man, that he should repent.” (It was noted in the June 3 study that this statement was probably made by Saul rather than Samuel.) Solomon was certainly as surprised as was Saul to find out that God was free to change his mind. Just as God had repented that he had made Saul king, so Solomon’s conduct made God repent that he had made Solomon king. Even though the word “repent” was not used in God’s judgment against Solomon, the idea was there: “I will surely tear the kingdom from you and will give it to your servant” (1 Kings 11:11). These words were almost identical with the pronouncement on Saul: “The Lord has torn the kingdom of Israel from you this day, and has given it to a neighbor of yours” (1 Samuel 15:28).

As Samuel had secretly anointed David, the prophet Ahijah privately informed Jeroboam (who was from the tribe of Ephraim and placed over the forced laborers of the house of Joseph [1 Kings 11:26–28]) of God’s choice of him to be the new king over all the tribes of Israel except the tribe of Judah

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(11:31, 35).

Once the prophet Ahijah informed Jeroboam of the role he was destined for as king over northern Israel, Jeroboam began to have his own problems. Somehow the private conversation between Ahijah and Jeroboam became known to King Solomon. Solomon plotted to have Jeroboam killed, with the result that Jeroboam went into political exile in Egypt and remained there as long as Solomon was alive. News of Solomon's death brought Jeroboam out of hiding, and he returned to await the transition of power.

Solomon's son, Rehoboam, ascended the throne, assuming that he would spend his life as king over all of Israel. He was either unaware of or foolishly discounted Ahijah's message that Jeroboam would become king over the ten northern tribes. Jeroboam himself seemed willing to forget Ahijah's promise and to abandon his claim to the throne. He sought an audience with Solomon's successor, Rehoboam, on behalf of his tribal constituency, seeking a promise from the new king that he would abandon the harsh policies of his father, Solomon, and initiate a new lenient economic and political program for the United Kingdom of Israel. Only after Rehoboam rejected the plea of the Israelites and announced instead that he would introduce a tougher program than his father had followed did Jeroboam move to put Ahijah's prophecy into practice. Since Rehoboam would not change his policies, Jeroboam would change the political structure.

Ironically, many Israelites thought the solution to their problem with the one king was to divide the realm and have two kings. Instead of dividing their problems, they actually multiplied them. Rebellion eventually led to civil war: "And there was war between Rehoboam and Jeroboam continually"

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(1 Kings 14:30; see also 15:6).

The tribe of Judah would remain an independent kingdom with a king who was a descendant of David. The neighboring tribe of Benjamin was probably forced to remain with Judah, with the result that the ten northern tribes became a political unit, the Northern Kingdom, and the tribes of Judah and Benjamin became the Southern Kingdom. The Levites abandoned their positions in the north and joined the two tribes of the Southern Kingdom (12:31).

### **Interpreting the Scriptures**

#### **1 Kings 12:6—“Then King Rehoboam took counsel with the old men.”**

Solomon’s successor, Rehoboam, traveled from Jerusalem to the ancient tribal center of Shechem. This move was done to accommodate the provincial interests of the northern tribes. His going to Shechem for his coronation was a gesture of goodwill, but at the same time it served notice on the northern tribes that he intended to be king over all the northern territories. It was a carefully calculated political move designed to pacify and to intimidate. But Rehoboam was unwilling to do anything but make a gesture of goodwill: he refused to establish goodwill.

The king-designate did not anticipate the pre-coronation interview demanded by Jeroboam and the assembly of Israel. Even less could he have anticipated their political proposition: “Your father made our yoke heavy. Now therefore lighten the hard service of your father and his heavy yoke upon us, and we will serve you” (12:4). It was a polite ultimatum, but an ultimatum nonetheless. Rehoboam was in a dilemma: to yield to the demand would be to rob his royal court of its revenue

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and thus prohibit his living in style as his father. But not to yield was to run the risk of rebellion. Rehoboam pleaded for time (three days) to consider the matter; he wanted to consult his advisers.

The “old men” with whom Rehoboam talked over the problem were the experienced elders who had served in King Solomon’s cabinet. They had the advantage of political insight derived from many years of service. They were the career officers of their government. Their advice to Rehoboam suggests that they understood the mood of the citizens: “If you will be a servant to this people . . . they will be your servants for ever” (12:7). It was sound advice worthy of the wisdom of Solomon: citizens will serve the government when the government serves the people. But Rehoboam lacked the common sense to follow good advice. He had looked to the experience of trusted royal advisers for wisdom and had found it—but he was unwilling to practice it. He rejected the advice of his senior counselors. He made a selfish decision. He refused to become a servant of the people.

**1 Kings 12:8 “He . . . took counsel with the young men who had grown up with him and stood before him.”**

The translators of this text have been very generous with the phrase “the young men.” Literally, the correct translation would be “children.” If the age of Rehoboam stated in 1 Kings 14:21 is correct, he was forty-one years old at this time, and these “young men,” or “children,” were his peers. A tradition survives in the Greek translations indicating that Rehoboam was only sixteen years old at the time. If he was forty-one, then the word “children” which was applied to his younger advisers was obviously derogatory in its intent.

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But whether they were children in reality or simply childish in their ideas, they were Rehoboam's peers and probably his childhood playmates. They had lived in the unreal world of Solomon's royal court. Spoiled with wealth and privilege, they would not willingly abandon their pampered life-style. With cruelty and selfish greed they advised Rehoboam to make things even tougher for the people. It was blind politics! They called for a tough policy against weak people. What folly they had learned in a royal court noted for its wisdom! With the meager mentality of slave masters they could but advise the would-be king to beat the people harder. They assumed that the greater the pain, the greater the productivity; the more fear the Israelites felt, the more faithfulness they would display.

### **1 Kings 12:11 —“My father chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scorpions.”**

Rehoboam quoted these words of his younger advisers to the citizens of Israel (12:14). His statement is a confession which corroborates the evidence of 1 Kings 5:13, that Solomon did indeed enslave native Israelites. The threat of greater oppression would have had no effect if the previous oppression had not been real. Israelites as well as aliens had felt the sting of Solomon's whips. Rehoboam offered his would-be subjects only greater pain. The “scorpion” was evidently the name given to a highly effective whip, which produced in the person being lashed pain as severe as the sting of a scorpion. Since scorpions are not a part of our environment or experience, a paraphrase of this threat may help us to appreciate its severity: “My father whipped you with his belt, but I will whip you with my belt buckle!”



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### **Applying the Lesson to Life**

Because of Solomon's reputation as the wisest man in the world, the temptation arises to romanticize this era of Israel's history and to gloss over the harsh historic facts. It was a period when the rich became richer because the poor were forced to become poorer. Somebody else's sweat had secured Solomon's wealth. His prosperity had a price tag, and the poor people paid the rich man's bills.

This life-style was as much Solomon's bequest to posterity as was his reputation for women and wisdom. His children learned well the values of their father: Rehoboam, with only the assets of Judah and Benjamin at his disposal, had eighteen wives and sixty mistresses! The moral issue was not the issue of monogamous or non-monogamous marriage, but the morality of Yahweh's anointed refusing to become a public servant, opting instead for privilege and power at the expense of the people.

There is something of Solomon and Rehoboam in most of us. The temptation to use others rather than to serve others is as much alive today as it was in Solomon's day. It comes to life even in the church as it came to life in ancient Israel. To yield to that temptation as a community, church, or as an individual is to introduce the seeds of ultimate destruction. The idolatry introduced by Solomon and Jeroboam was but a symptom of the confused ethical and religious priorities of these men. The search for wisdom must end with the practice of wisdom.

Rehoboam received good advice, but he did not follow it. The wisdom of the elders was rejected for the opinions of childish and immature friends who were nothing more than "yes-men." In civil politics and church politics we need to be

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on guard against “yes-men who repudiate the wisdom of the ages in a greedy attempt to achieve or maintain power and privilege. There will always be conflicting advice on any given problem, but the word “service” may provide the best clue to determine what advice to follow. The wisdom of Solomon’s advisers has yet to be refuted: “If you will be a servant to this people today . . . they will be your servants for ever” (1 Kings 12:7).

This lesson strongly suggests that the opinions of older people be considered more seriously and not be so hastily ignored. Experience does bring its own unique type of wisdom. This is not to belittle young thinkers or the fresh ideas of youth who challenge old traditions. The real distinction must be made between maturity and childishness; no direct correlation can be established between maturity and a person’s age. Childishness is no respecter of persons. Childishness is characterized by the desire to be served, but maturity is distinguished by its desire to be of service. When national leaders or ordinary citizens, or when clergy or the laity, seek to be served rather than to be of service, spiritual decline has set in, and the days of unity are numbered.

The tension between national aspirations and religious commitments is quite natural. When the tension is absent, it may well be evidence that we have followed the leadership of Jeroboam and identified national security with religiosity. It is easy to create a civic religion wherein God becomes the tool of the politician, religious institutions cater to the political system, and to criticize the political leader or his regime is considered to be blasphemy. True religion, by contrast, demands that political leaders serve the people as directed by the wisdom of God.