

One could read today's story as a discouraging exploration of *realpolitik*, the grim "realism" that takes conflict and corruption in politics as givens, and does not aspire to any more nobler way of exercising power. I don't want to read it that way, but I think we have to face up to how hard the questions are that it poses before we skip off happily to a more sanguine message.

The story takes place after the death of King Solomon, who had succeeded *his* father, King David, as monarch of all Israel. David had started out as a little shepherd boy who leveraged his musical talents and stone-slinging skills against far greater power, and ultimately gained the throne. He had then managed to unite all 12 tribes of Israel into one state, and then proceeded to do some less admirable but typically kingly things like appropriating other men's wives and playing his cabinet officers off against each other.

Solomon, who succeeded his father, had grown up as royalty. All his life he was accustomed to royal power, and although he is recorded as having asked for wisdom, he *definitely* engaged in expensive building projects, enslaving his own subjects to get the work done more cheaply, and married many wives purely as diplomatic or commercial maneuvers. *And* he built "high places" where his wives' gods could be worshiped, which makes me wonder if he built the Temple thinking that that would appease God.

Solomon had always had privilege and power, and he was succeeded by his son, Rehoboam, who felt even more entitled. But there's some back story here that's important, before I go on. During Solomon's reign, a guy named Jeroboam had met the prophet Ahijah, who had told him that God was going to give Jeroboam most of Israel, taking it away from Solomon. *However*, out of respect for the promise God had made to David, God wouldn't

actually tear the land away from Solomon until after his death. So Jeroboam went and hid out in Egypt until he heard that Solomon had died. The reason this is important is that the monarchy was sort of a compromise between God and the people. Before there was a monarchy, there were judges, and that's the way God wanted it, but the people failed to handle that kind of non-coercive government well. The book of Judges ends with a horrendous massacre, and says, "In those days, every man did what was right in his eyes." So God reluctantly gave the people a monarchy, but also warned them that kings would exploit them and they'd be sorry. It all raises the question, what exactly *should* have happened as Israel became larger and more complex? What *did* God intend for Israel in terms of governance?

So that question is in the background as Rehoboam prepares to succeed his father and Jeroboam returns from Egypt to see if he's going to get that portion of Israel that the prophet had told him God promised. What is the will of God for the governance of the people of Israel?

Rehoboam gets advice from wise old advisors of his father's and young smart guys he'd grown up with. The wise old men tell him to ease up on the people, that Solomon had made their lives too hard. But Rehoboam listens to his younger friends, and tells "the assembly of Israel," "My little finger is thicker than my father's loins." A little toxic masculinity there. "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." And the people, led by Jeroboam, later on out of there. Rehoboam, who had thought he was in a position of great strength, is left with a very small portion of the land and the people, hereafter called not Israel but Judah.

What I would have expected, at this point, would be for Jeroboam and the ten tribes of Israel to set up a much more faithful and egalitarian little state in the northern part of the land,

faithful to God and a model of what Rehoboam could and should have done. After all, Jeroboam is one of those rags-to-riches characters who rose to prominence by being industrious and competent. God chose him, a virtuous nobody, to rule over Israel because Solomon had abused his own power.

But no, the minute Rehoboam gets all set up to rule Israel, he starts worrying about how to preserve his power. He realizes that his people are still going to have to travel to Jerusalem several times a year if they want to make the scheduled sacrifices. Going back like that repeatedly will remind them of happier times when the country was united and, he fears, his people will regret seceding, kill him, and go back to Rehoboam. So he *makes two golden calves* and tells the people they don't need to go to Jerusalem any more: "Here are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt."

What was he thinking? Golden calves, of all things! In what universe did it seem like a good idea to let God award him a kingdom (because the other king was unfit), and then tell the people to worship *any* other deity, let alone golden calves, which had already been tried once by Moses' brother Aaron with *very poor results*? I think 40 years in the wilderness was the penalty that time. This is where my mind really boggles.

Judges hadn't worked as a system of government; not enough accountability. Kings had quickly become corrupt and self-serving. Going back to the tried-and-true model of picking a virtuous young commoner out to become king also doesn't work. What are we supposed to take from this? *Does* God have any kind of plan or even set of priorities for this chosen people?

We can certainly observe that the attempt to compound security does not in fact make people more secure. Rehoboam overplayed his hand, bragging about how much tougher he

would be than his father had been, and Jeroboam brought disaster on himself by trying to do an end run around any possible rebellion that might take place in the future. Maybe Rehoboam, brought up a prince and constant witness to his father's own excesses, simply lacked the perspective to realize that soft power is still power. It's tempting to see him as a sort of Ancient Near Eastern Donald Trump. And it is somehow reassuring to know that God, like Elizabeth Warren, had a plan for that, which was Jeroboam.

But then Jeroboam also screws up. He's the one I really don't understand. Maybe he choked. Maybe all the drama and responsibility and high stakes made him think he couldn't afford to make any mistakes, and he had to think of everything and provide for every contingency, until he lost all perspective and repeated the mistake that Aaron had made so long ago. Golden calves, forsooth.

Here's what I *can* say. You can't sit back and rely on your leaders to do the right thing. If you're a leader, you need to try not to be too anxious and borrow a lot of jacks, as June would say. But for most of us who *have* leaders, we probably shouldn't rely on them to do what we can do for ourselves. The people of Israel set a great example when they went to prince Rehoboam right after his father's death and tried to negotiate with him. They spoke up for themselves and said, "Your dad really tapped us out. We need you to ease up." They couldn't compel him, of course, but he was foolish not to listen to them. And then when he postured and carried on about how big his fingers were, they just said Nope and went away to their tents. They spoke their truth, and they walked away from business as usual governance, even though they didn't yet know what they were walking *toward*.

The other thing I would say is that both kings took their eyes off the values of a

covenanted community, and reduced their roles to strategists. It's as if simply preserving their positions had value in itself. But the value of Israel was always in its promise (and imperfect practice) of the values of looking out for the vulnerable, dealing equitably with others, making no idol in the place of God who loved them. Rehoboam, a descendant of King David, certainly carried on the tradition of having a Davidic king on the throne. But what good was that to anybody if he refused to be the kind of king that David had been at his best? Simply preserving the institution, without refreshing constantly the commitment to covenant, made kingship in Judah and in Israel just like kingship in Assyria or Egypt.

Finally, though, although conditions for civic collapse and division were the result of the royal decisions of David and Solomon It is the LORD, who initiates and leads the process of change, over and over. God never just fixes it once and for all, but God does keep offering openings for change—openings to the two kings, and openings to the people to also act with some agency. There is always *someone* who remembers the covenant, looks at what is, and says, It doesn't have to be this way, because God is. The covenant is the constant, and that's what we need to keep before us as we seek more perfect governance.

Mighty God, your servant Rehoboam divided your kingdom with his tyranny, yet you remained faithful to both kingdoms, even in the midst of conflict. Show us your presence in conflict, and help us to resolve our differences, uniting this world in your name. Amen.