

**February 13, 2005**  
**Last Sunday Before the Tridion**

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Rehoboam was almost the perfect example of what the Bible means by the word "fool." Because he was the son of Solomon, Israel's wisest king, this foolishness was a matter of irony as well as tragedy.

After Solomon's death in 922, this heir to Israel's throne traveled to Schechem, to receive the nation's endorsement as its new ruler. The move was especially necessary with respect to Israel's northern tribes, a people touchy about their traditional rights and needing to be handled gently. Even David, we recall, had to be made king twice, first over Judah about the year 1000 (2 Samuel 2:4,10) and then over the north some years later (5:4-5).

Those northern tribes, for their part, seemed willing to be ruled by Rehoboam, but they craved assurance that the new king would respect their ancient traditions and customs. Truth be told, they had not been entirely happy with Rehoboam's father, Solomon, and they sought from his son a simple pledge that their grievances would be taken seriously in the future (1 Kings 12:1-4). A great deal depended on Rehoboam's answer.

The new king apparently took the matter seriously, because he sought counsel on what to say. He began by consulting the seniors of the royal court, the very men who had for forty years provided guidance for his father. These were the elder statesmen of the realm, those qualified to give the most prudent political counsel.

Significantly, these older men urged Rehoboam in the direction of caution and moderation with respect to the northern tribes: "If you will be a servant to this people today and serve them, and speak good words to them when you answer them, then they will be your servants forever" (12:7).

Rehoboam, nonetheless, eschewing the instruction of his elders, followed the impulses of his younger companions, who encouraged him to stand tough and not let himself be pushed around. Indeed, they urged Rehoboam to be insulting and provocative to the petitioners (12:8-11). Pursuing this foolish counsel, then, he immediately lost the larger part of his kingdom (12:12-16).

As I suggested above, there is great irony here, for it may be said that one of the major practical purposes of the Book of Proverbs, traditionally ascribed to Solomon, was to prevent and preclude exactly the mistake made by Solomon's son. According to Proverbs, the fool is the man who ignores the counsel of the old and follows the impulses of untried youth.

Many a life has been ruined--and in this case a kingdom lost--because someone preferred the pooled stupidity of his contemporaries to the accumulated wisdom of his elders. Those whose counsel Rehoboam spurned, after all, were not just any old men. They were the very ancients who had provided guidance to Israel's most sagacious monarch.

Rehoboam's reign of seventeen years knew its ups and downs, the downs dominant. Five years after the story narrated above, Pharaoh Shishak, founder of Egypt's twenty-second dynasty, invaded the Holy Land and took pretty much whatever attracted his eye: "In the fifth year of King Rehoboam, Shishak king of Egypt came up against Jerusalem. He took away the treasures of the house of the Lord and the treasures of the king's house. He took away everything. He also took away all the shields of gold that Solomon had made" (14:26).

The Sacred Text goes on to remark, "King Rehoboam made in their place shields of bronze" 14:27). By setting bronze shields in the Temple to replace the golden shields of Solomon, Rehoboam enacted a truly wretched symbolism. Some of the ancients (Daniel, Hesiod, Ovid) spoke of an historical decline from a golden age to a silver age, and thence to a bronze age. No one disputes, of course, that Solomon's was a golden age (10:14-29). However, the reign of Rehoboam, his heir, was not just a declension to silver, but all the way to bronze. The lunge, when it came, came at once, in a single generation.

Rehoboam remained, Josephus tells us, "a proud and foolish man" (Antiquities 8.10.4). He never recovered from the singular folly of his first political decision. After Shishak's invasion, this thin, pathetic shadow of his father and grandfather reigned under a humiliating Egyptian suzerainty for a dozen more years. Like every fool, he had a heart problem. The final word about Rehoboam asserts, "he did evil, for he did not set his heart to seek the Lord" (2 Chronicles 12:14).

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