Rehoboam:
I was the fourth king of Israel. For a few days, anyway.

I don't want to sound like a whiner, but from birth I never really had a chance. My father was King Solomon. He had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines. There is no record of how many children he fathered. There was no big argument about who was to succeed him upon his death. It was me.

My mother was of the royal family of another country, as were most of King Solomon's other wives. I grew up in a lavish palace, and was as spoiled as anybody could be. Like a lot of rich kids, I attracted a group of friends that were not mature or wise. We just wanted to have a good time. My father didn't have any time to for me. In fact, I barely knew him. He certainly didn't take the time to train me up in the way I should go or pass any special wisdom to me.

The one thing he did give to me was the inclination to marry many women. I had 18 wives and 60 concubines, who gave me 28 sons and 60 daughters. Talk about a high-estrogen house.

After reigning over Israel for forty years, my father died. We should been a little apprehensive the year before he died, because his father, David, had reigned for about forty years, as did his predecessor, Saul.[1] Oh well. After a lavish burial, I succeeded Solomon as king.

The who's who of Israel gathered in Shechem to crown me as king. I'm thinking, it's going to be a simple coronation, boy, was I wrong. The surprise of my life. Enter a rough looking man, looked like he had been traveling for days. I asked about him, and I found that he was none other than the enemy of my father, Jeroboam, who had fled to Egypt. I couldn't quite remember what had caused him to flee, and nobody seemed eager to remind me, so I just let it go.

I stood in front of the people, expecting to be crowned king by an enthusiastic crowd. I got no such thing. Instead, Jeroboam and the people asked for their burden to be lightened from the harsh labor and heavy obligations my father had put on them. They said if I did so, they would serve me. They didn't say what they would do if I didn't. I stood in shock. I didn't know what to say, so I told them that I would give them my answer in three days.

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[1] Acts 13:21

A day of feasting became a day of panic. I turned to the elders who had served my father and asked their advice. They replied that I should serve the people by lightening their burden, and that they would be my life-long servants if I did so. I didn't like their answer. I didn't want to reduce my lifestyle or stop the building projects, so I rejected them and their advice.

I turned to my friends and asked their advice. Why I did that is still a mystery to me. My friends had never made good decisions in their lives. They were only interested in continuing their lavish lifestyles like me. They insisted that I reject the people's request and threaten to make their burdens even heavier. I did not want to look weak in my friends' eyes, so I took their advice.

After three days, I delivered my verdict. I told the people that I was going to make their burden heavier, not lighter. It never dawned on me that I was only king because they consented for me to be king. The entire country of Israel listened, and then a huge majority declared that they no longer considered me their king. They packed up and they went home. In an instant, I was the acknowledged king of only the tribes of Judah and Benjamin.

On my way back to Jerusalem, I determined to regain my father's entire kingdom. I didn't bother to ask God what I should do, I knew he had already decreed that this split would happen. I had all the authority I needed to declare war. I gathered all of the young men of Judah and Benjamin to go to war and regain my kingdom. But one man changed my mind.

Shemaiah spoke to me and my people with the authority of the Lord. He said that we should not fight against our brothers, and that we should go home because God had decreed the split of the kingdom. So it was official, I was only the king of the tiny Southern Kingdom, consisting of the lands of Judah and Benjamin, including the city of Jerusalem, also referred to as the Kingdom of Judah. Rehoboam, King of Judah…doesn't have the same ring to it as King of Israel.

Jeroboam:

Many years before Solomon died, the prophet Ahijah was sent by God to promise me a kingdom consisting of ten tribes of Israel. I had complete trust in that promise. I patiently bided my time in Egypt where I'd fled to escape Solomon's threats.

I heard rumors that Solomon was dying, so I returned to Israel and prepared to claim the kingdom God had promised me. My old friends and supporters were thrilled that I was back. When Solomon died, I was ready to claim the kingdom God had promised me.

I remember with pleasure the look on Rehoboam's face when the people rebelled. They weren't about to follow him. They could clearly see that he was foolish, and he was too foolish to recognize that. He went absolutely crazy when he found they had voluntarily crowned me as the king of the new Northern Kingdom, also known as the Kingdom of Samaria.

What I recognized, but Rehoboam did not, was that Israel had only been unified for decades, several decades. But still, that's not very long. Their natural inclination was not to be a unified nation. Rehoboam gave them a reason to rebel, and they took it.

Unfortunately, it was only a short time before I, too, neglected to follow God. I paid no attention to the fact that God said I, along with my line of descendants, would lose the kingdom if I did not obey him. But I feared losing the loyalty of my subjects. What would happen if they returned to Jerusalem to worship God in the Temple? I would lose them. My solution was simple.

I decided to make it easier for my subjects to worship in my kingdom than go all the way to Jerusalem. People are driven by convenience and ease, true today, but true then. I built two golden calves and placed them in cities much closer than Jerusalem for many of my subjects. I took many of God's requirements and changed them for my own purposes. I built many places to worship, appointed non-Levites as priests, promoted worship of false gods, and did many other detestable things. They quickly chose to follow my ways — I made it easier and cheaper for the people to worship my way than God's way.

A man of God came to warn me to change my ways. I kept appointing priests and leading my people to worship false gods. Sowing the seeds for my destruction. I ruled over the Northern Kingdom for twenty-two years, but watched the male heirs of my family die one after the other.

So, now the question: good king or a bad king? I was a horrible king because I led the people even deeper into idolatry.

Rehoboam:
The more I understood my new situation, the more furious I got. The Northern Kingdom of Jeroboam was not much bigger in size than my Southern Kingdom, but that is where the similarities ended.

The Northern Kingdom had better farming land than we did, it controlled the Sea of Galilee and the Jordan River plus it also controlled the countries of Aram, Ammon and Moab that King David had conquered. The vast amount of tribute from these countries would support the Northern Kingdom for many years.

The Northern Kingdom would also control the northern portion of Philistia, so it would control a large part of the coastal plain and ports along the sea. This also meant that the Northern Kingdom would control a large part of the lucrative Via Maris trade route.

My kingdom, the Southern Kingdom, was full of desert, hills, and rocks. I owned the wilderness and the Dead Sea. My land was far inferior to that of the Northern Kingdom. I did control the vassal nation of Edom, but King David had devastated that country so badly that it was not capable of giving me much tribute.

I did control the southern part of Philistia, so I did own part of the coastal plain and some sea ports. If it had not been for this area, my people would have suffered greatly.

What I misjudged was the countries of Aram, Ammon, Moab and Edom. As both the Northern and Southern Kingdoms declined in power, these countries would find it useful to rebel and to become our enemies. The tributes that flowed into our coffers would soon hemorrhage into a devastating military defense cost.

I did control Jerusalem with its fabulous Temple full of wealth. That control was a mixed blessing, however. I felt like I could live off the wealth of the Temple for decades, but the worship of God was a huge distraction to my people, I wanted them to worship Baal and other false gods. Like so many other things, I vastly misjudged the situation concerning the Temple.

I was forty-one years old when I began to reign over the Southern Kingdom, and I stayed in power for seventeen years. I surpassed my rival, Jeroboam, in leading my people to worship idols. We were more pagan than all the pagans who lived in Israel before Joshua drove them out.

My fifth year in power, Pharaoh of Egypt victoriously attacked Jerusalem. God allowed it to happen. Pharaoh carried off all of the treasures of the Temple and my palace. It is hard to even imagine the amount of wealth that was taken. My power was diminished. I was now a king in name only.

Throughout my reign, my kingdom continually fought against Jeroboam and the Northern Kingdom. By doing so, we were disobedient to God. We weakened each other without benefit to anyone. Good king or a bad king? Like Jeroboam, I was a horrible king. I led the people so deep into idolatry that they could never fully recover.

Jeroboam and I set the stage for all of the future kings and prophets of Israel. The battleground was the hearts of the people, and we had turned their hearts from God. In his desire for his people to return to him, God disciplined his people in various ways, including using our country's enemies. But…his discipline didn't provide a long-term change in their hearts.

In less than twenty years after Solomon's death, Israel was split into two kingdoms, both kingdoms had been decimated of wealth and people, and both kingdoms were steeped in idolatry. What a swift, incredible decline from Israel's Golden Age. And I was the leading cause. Bad king, indeed.