

Gideon is dead. The deliverer of Israel, the one who defeated Midian is no more. No sooner has Gideon been buried than the "ethical and spiritual seed sown by Gideon/Jerubbaal came to full bloom and fruition in the life of his son Abimelech." Chapter nine of the Book of Judges is a sad chapter in the history of Israel. The writer shows us a nation that has become totally Canaanized, where "Baal has contended for himself and prevailed." In this session, we will not deal with an external threat to Israel but an internal problem of politics. The writer concentrates on Abimelech and the Canaanite city of Shechem over which he ruled. This chapter can be broken into four logical parts: 1) Abimelech's seizure of rule in Shechem v1-6; 2) The parable of rule v7-21; 3) Abimelech's demise and death v22-55; and 4) The closing to this sad chapter Israel v56-57. First a brief prelude to Abimelech in 8.33-35.

Judges 8.33 reveals Israel's reversion to idolatry. When Gideon dies, the children of Israel turn from Yahweh and seek Baal, making Baal-berith their god. The meaning of *Baal-berith* is "the Covenant Baal," and is equal to the El-Berith mentioned later in 9:46. It does not signify Baal as the god of the covenants, but Baal in the covenant, that is, the god with whom they made the covenant. Baal became the covenant-god of Israel instead of Yahweh. Forgetting God, who delivered them from their enemies (8.34), Israel also forgot Jerubbaal (Gideon) and showed no loyalty to his family (8.35). In chapter nine, Gideon is only called by the name Jerubbaal, the Baal Fighter, while his son goes back to the worship of Baal.

Abimelech's seizure of rule in Shechem 9.1-6

Verses 1-2 records Abimelech's offer to the men of Shechem. Abimelech approaches his mother's family, in Shechem, to secure their support. The Shechemites may still have been primarily Canaanite, because the Book of Joshua does not mention a national conquest of *Shechem*, merely that there is no opposition to his arrival there. This may also account for the worship of Baal-Berith. Later, in 9:28, they are also called the men of Hamor—and Hamor was the Canaanite king of *Shechem*, previously mentioned in Genesis 34. Being a Canaanite city, and having a history of city-statehood, may account for Shechem's acceptance of Abimelech as the king of their city-state.

Abimelech's first step in verse 1 was to secure the support of his mother's brothers. Abimelech's mother may have been a Canaanite herself, and therefore provided the blood tie. Verse 2 deals with the second stage of the offer. Abimelech enlisted his relatives to secure the support of the aristocracy of *Shechem*. In his address, Abimelech presented two arguments. First, he asked, whether it was better to have one ruler than seventy rulers? The writer gives us no indication that any of Jerubbaal's other sons had any ambitions to lead Israel. To this point, no Judge was succeeded by a son and Gideon himself had rejected such a dynastic rule.

Second, Abimelech asked the men of Succoth to remember that he was their flesh and blood, implying that it is better to be ruled by an insider than an

outsider. It is ironic that Abimelech sought the support of his mother's family to put him on the throne while he murdered all his relatives on his father's side to stay there. It would seem likely that through his mother he was half-Canaanite, so he was related to the men of *Shechem* by blood through his mother. This was not true of any of the other seventy sons that Gideon had.

Verses 3-4 records the agreement of the Shechemites and the building of Abimelech's mercenary army. At the instigation of his mother's family, the Shechemites were convinced to follow Abimelech. The Canaanite blood-tie was the most convincing argument, and Abimelech will act more like a Canaanite than a Jew. The Shechemites not only provide verbal support to Abimelech but monetary support as well. Interestingly, the Shechemites contributed 70 pieces of silver to Abimelech; this is the same number of Abimelech's half-brothers that he was about to slaughter. The silver came from the sanctuary dedicated to Baal, Baal-berith and is used to hire an army described as "reckless adventurers" in the NIV.

The word translated reckless, in Hebrew means "empty," and denotes men with idle hands and empty stomachs, but with no desire to work or earn an honest living. These men were without possessions, willing to sell themselves for any task. The same word will be used of the men that Jephthah will gather around him later in 11:3. The second word translated "adventurers" is a Hebrew meaning "to boil up" or "to be violent," and implies that these were reckless, licentious men. The men, who followed Abimelech, were idle and worthless, devoid of wisdom and moral understanding.

Verse 5 is a summary of Abimelech's assassination of the sixty-nine sons of Gideon. The verse tells us that the slaughter was done on one stone, implying that the sons of Jerubbaal were killed one by one. This was not a quick slaughter of unsuspecting victims, but a calculated brutal act of murder trying to foster terror. However, one half-brother escaped, Jotham, the youngest son of Jerubbaal. This scene drips with symbolism. The seventy sons of Israel, children of Yahweh, slaughtered as a sacrifice to Baal, the children of Jerubbaal, the fighter of Baal, are defeated and murdered by Abimelech, a worshipper of Baal, a son of Jerubbaal.

Abimelech's successful campaign to be made king concludes in v6 with his coronation. Two groups of the aristocracy of Shechem were responsible for Abimelech's kingship, the aristocracy of Shechem, and the house of Beth-Millo. These two groups made Abimelech King. The kingdom of Abimelech was limited to four cities: Shechem, Beth-Millo, Arumah, and Thebez. His three-year rule was secured by gall, maintained by force, and did not survive his death. He was never a judge, and never much of a king. The place of the coronation was by the "great tree at the pillar that was in Shechem." In Joshua 24.26, this was the place of the renewal of the covenant ceremony. Now it became an idolatrous place, representing Baal in a Canaanite-cultic installation. The oak was a sacred tree in the sanctuary area, and this reference to it highlights the religious significance of

the event of Abimelech's coronation.

Parable of Jotham—9:7–21

Verse 7 describes the circumstance surrounding Jotham's pronouncement concerning Abimelech's self-appointed kingship. From the top of Mount Gerizim, it is easy to look down on Shechem. There is to this day a triangular platform projecting from the mountainside, which overlooks the city in the valley, and this would make a natural pulpit to proclaim the message. Jotham issues a call to the men of Shechem. This verse serves as a preamble to the parable or fable, a short story told in poetic or prose form, which teaches a moral lesson and uses people, animals, plants, or inanimate objects that act like people.

The fable is recorded in verses 8 to 15. Verse 8a provides the background; the trees went out to anoint a king for them. The offer of kingship is made to an olive tree, a fig tree, and a grape, and all reject the offer. Finally, in Judges 9:14–15, the searching trees make the same offer to the thorn bush. The thorn bush produces nothing of value and is worthless even as timber. Furthermore, it is dangerous and a menace to the farmer if it catches fire, because it can destroy the whole crop. Moreover, by catching fire, it would be a danger to the lofty trees around it. Finally, it casts virtually no shadow, and lies very close to the ground, and therefore is of no value for shade.

The trees, having failed to tempt the useful trees to leave their usefulness for the sake of status, as a last resort, offered the kingship to the lowest grade of plant life, the thorn bush. In v15, the thorn bush accepts the trees' offer. "The thorn bush said to the trees, If you really want to anoint me king over you, come and take refuge in my shade; but if not, then let fire come out of the thorn bush and consume the cedars of Lebanon!" The thorn bush offers almost no shade and the little that it does produce cannot provide needed shade for lofty trees. The story continues, although the thorn bush is so lowly, it can destroy the noblest tree of all, the cedar of Lebanon. The point is, Abimelech can offer no security or comfort to Shechem, and, in fact, he will be the source and cause of its destruction.

In verses 16 to 21, Jotham gives the application of the parable and then runs away into hiding. First, Jotham asks if the men of Shechem are acting "honorably and in good faith?" If Shechem has done righteously in all that they did to Gideon, who had risked his life for them, then well and good. The literal reading of the Hebrew text is, "My father cast away his soul at a distance," meaning he did not consider his own life of any consequence to himself if it meant the saving of Israel. Even the Canaanite population still in the land, who also had suffered from the Midianite raids, benefited from Gideon's campaign. Jotham declares: "if then you have acted honorably and in good faith toward Jerubbaal and his family today," then the result should be "may Abimelech be your joy, and may you be his, too!" There is a tone of sarcasm here, "May you have much happiness with this thorn bush king of yours--you deserve each

other!" But, of course, the caveat is, they are wished happiness if they have acted rightly in what they did. In verse 20, comes the application of unrighteousness: "But if you have not, let fire come out from Abimelech and consume you, citizens of Shechem and Beth Millo, and let fire come out from you, citizens of Shechem and Beth Millo, and consume Abimelech!" If they have not done well, may you destroy each other. Verse 21 records Jotham's escape as he goes into hiding, probably for the three years that Abimelech was living.

Like one of Aesop's fables, Jotham's speech is a message that continues to be relevant even in our modern world. Let's see what we can glean from it?

- 1) Kingship is understood in a negative light. "It is self-destructive and destructive of the very ones it is intended to protect.
- 2) Good people who are engaged in constructive activity do not have time to for politics or political agendas, they are more interested in serving than being served. As a result, politics falls to those who are just the opposite, they want to be served and have little interest in serving or meeting the needs of others.
- 3) Kings or rulers seek power to satisfy their self-interests. They will do whatever is necessary to gain that power and keep it, even making promises they can't keep.
- 4) People get the leaders they deserve. As Jotham so rightly points out, if we are foolish enough to select a worthless man to be our leader or king, then we cannot complain about the results he produces.

In this situation, Abimelech was a worthless man, who appeared to be significant in only his eyes. Abimelech was the embodiment of all that Jotham felt was wrong about kings or political leaders. The treachery of Abimelech and the Shechemites against Gideon and his family was indeed wrong, yet the greater crime was Israel's treachery against Yahweh. Israel's treatment of Yahweh and their relationship with Him are reflected in their relationship to each other. The issue is not about politics but about the religious and spiritual state of Israel's heart. It is here that we see the real treachery. The rest of the chapter deals with events confirming the correctness of Jotham's words.

Conflict in Shechem—9:22–25

We are given a glimpse of things to come in verse 22. "After Abimelech had governed Israel three years." There are three significant elements to be found in this simple statement. First, the word translated govern(ed) is from the Hebrew word which means prince, captain, or official, and not the word melech, which means king. By using this word, the writer states that Abimelech governed, but that he does not accept him as a king as the aristocracy of Shechem did. This shows that Abimelech did not fulfill Israel's need for a king. The second element is the usage of the term Israel. Israel is not always used of the whole nation, and here it is used more locally. In this case, Israel refers to Greater Shechem, with

those four cities mentioned earlier. The last element is that the length of his rule is announced at the beginning rather than at the end, which is the norm in this book. This signals the reader that Abimelech's attempt to be king would not last as long as any of the oppressions or any of the periods of rest in the book.

In v23-24, divine vindication of Jotham's judgment begins with the divine action, as God intervenes between Abimelech and the men of Shechem. God's purpose for sending a bad spirit is twofold. By sending the "calamitous spirit" between Abimelech and the nobles of Shechem, God destroys the relationship that had existed between Abimelech and the men of Shechem. The broken relationship led to a break in faith between Abimelech and the men of Shechem in v23. The verb translated in the NIV "acted treacherously" is normally used to mean break faith, "especially with someone with whom one is in covenant relationship." The writer's choice of words is intentional as it represents a clear contrast to the words used by Jotham in v16 and 19, "acted honorably and in good faith." Block suggests that: "Although the immediate cause of Abimelech's death was a resourceful woman of Thebez (v. 53), ultimately the circumstances that led to his ignominious end were caused by the spirit sent by God." This "calamitous spirit" was sent to punish both Abimelech and the lords of Shechem. God will use this bad spirit to bring about the break in faith between Abimelech and the men of Shechem that will avenge Abimelech's crime against Jerubbaal's seventy sons and punish the aristocrats of the city because they supported Abimelech in the murder of his brothers.

Verse 25 describes Shechem's treachery as they now turn against Abimelech by using a strategy of "highway robbery." As the caravans were coming to pay tribute to Abimelech, the men of Shechem robbed them. This highway robbery would bring the government of Abimelech into disrepute. The fact that this had to be "reported to Abimelech" indicates that the seat of government was not in Shechem, a point made again in 9:31. The actions of the men of Shechem achieved two ends. First, it showed that Abimelech could not guarantee the safety of travelers in his domain. Second, they deprived him of the tribute he would have reaped from the caravans.

Challenge of Gaal—9:26–41

The person who defies Abimelech in verse 26 was Gaal the son of Ebed, whose name means "to loathe" or "to abhor." The name of his father, Ebed, means, "slave." Thus, he was "the abhorred one, the son of a slave," which may have been his nickname. He moved to Shechem with his brothers, resulting in a change of allegiance, as the men of Shechem put their trust in him, to help them in their revolt against Abimelech.

Verse 27 indicates that it is harvest time, and that the people of Shechem were celebrating a harvest festival at the house of their god, which would have been Baal-Berith. During the feast they ate, drank, cursed and complained about Abimelech. It is against this backdrop that the writer informs us of the boasts of Gaal in v28-29. Gaal makes two boasts. First, he asks, "Who is Abimelech, and

who is Shechem, that we should be subject to him? "Shechem here does not refer to the city, but to Abimelech, the leader of the city. Gaal continues, "Isn't he Jerubbaal's son?" Whereas Abimelech connected himself with his Canaanite mother, Gaal connected Abimelech with his Jewish father. Gaal reminds the people that Abimelech was the son of the Baal Fighter.

Gaal set himself up as the defender of Baal, and of Shechem, against the son of the Baal Fighter. Gaal argued that Abimelech should be regarded, not as flesh and blood, but as a contemptible person because he was the son of Jerubbaal, the son of the man who destroyed the altar of Baal and restored the worship of Yahweh. Gaal then chides, "Is Zebul his officer?" The might of Shechem did not consist of the authority of its magistrate, Zebul, since Abimelech had appointed him. Thus, there is no need for the Shechemites to serve him either. Gaal added: "Serve the men of Hamor, Shechem's father! Why should we serve Abimelech?" Hamor was the Hivite prince who had founded Shechem (Gen. 33:19; 34:2; Josh. 24:32). The men of Hamor were the patricians of the city, who had origins from the noblest and most ancient stock of the city's founder.

Gaal placed the men of Hamor in opposition to Zebul. So the Shechemites should be serving the men of Hamor, not Abimelech or his appointee, Zebul. Gaal concludes in Judges 9:29 with his boastful call to reject Israelite rule and reinsert Canaanite rule by saying, "If only this people were under my command! Then I would get rid of him. I would say to Abimelech, Call out your whole army!" This was pure defiance.

Zebul's sends a report to Abimelech, without Gaal's knowledge, of what was happening. Zebul's message reports on the rebellion and gives Zebul's advice on arranging a surprise attack on Gaal and his men (v30-33).

Abimelech's defeat of Gaal is described in v34-41. Verse 34 describes Abimelech's deployment against Gaal's attack: "So Abimelech and all his troops set out by night and took up concealed positions near Shechem in four companies." Verse 35 lists initial developments on both sides. In verses 36-38, Gaal makes two observations and Zebul two replies. "When Gaal saw them, he said to Zebul, Look, people are coming down from the tops of the mountains!" Zebul replied, "You mistake the shadows of the mountains for men." But Gaal spoke up again: "Look, people are coming down from the center of the land, and a company is coming from the direction of the soothsayers' tree." Then Zebul said to him, "Where is your big talk now, you who said, who is Abimelech that we should be subject to him? Aren't these the men you ridiculed? Go out and fight them!"

The results of the battle are recorded in v39-41. "So Gaal led out the citizens of Shechem and fought Abimelech. Abimelech chased him, and many fell wounded in the flight-all the way to the entrance to the gate. Abimelech stayed in Arumah, and Zebul drove Gaal and his brothers out of Shechem." Abimelech was not able to penetrate the city's defenses and could not capture the city at this point. Abimelech stays in Arumah, which may have been another point of contention for

the Shechemites since it was they who made him king, not Arumah. Zebul drives Gaal and his brothers out of Shechem and Gaal is not heard of again.

Destruction of Shechem - 9.42-49

The destruction of Shechem is told in v42-49. After the defeat of Gaal, Abimelech turns his attention to addressing the rebellion of the men of Shechem. Upon hearing that the men of Shechem had left the city to go into the fields, Abimelech divides his troops into three companies, reminiscent of his father's strategy against the Midianites, and with two companies rushing to attack those in men of Shechem in the fields, the third company rushes to the gates of the city of Shechem to cutoff the men of Shechem's return to their city. This maneuver wiped out the Shechemites caught outside the city. In v45, we see the brutal destruction of the city of Shechem and its citizens that were trapped inside. "All that day Abimelech pressed his attack against the city until he had captured it and killed its people. Then he destroyed the city and scattered salt over it."

Next, verses 46-49 tell us that upon hearing of the slaughter of the Shechemites both outside and inside the city, the remaining people fled seeking sanctuary in the stronghold or the tower of Shechem. Abimelech sought to destroy them as well. Cutting some boughs off a nearby tree, Abimelech orders his men to copy him, and taking these boughs place them around the foundation of the tower and light them. All the people in the tower were burned to death. In this way, the prophecy of Jotham was essentially literally fulfilled: Fire did come from Abimelech and destroyed the men of Shechem. In this manner, another Canaanite enclave had been eradicated from the Land.

Death of Abimelech - 9.50-57

Verses 50-54 give the circumstances of Abimelech's death. Abimelech leads his army against the city of Thebez. The citizens, aware of Abimelech's pending attack, retreat to the stronghold of their city to defend themselves. Following the strategy that proved successful in destroying the stronghold of Shechem, Abimelech and his men cut off the boughs of trees and laying them around the base of the stronghold. A woman, on top of the stronghold, drops a millstone that hits Abimelech, cracking his skull. Realizing he was dealt a mortal blow, Abimelech requests death at the hands of his armor bearer so it could not be said that he died at the hands of a woman. This incident will be remembered many years later by King David (II Sam. 11:21). To a warrior, the most ignoble death was that inflicted by a woman. But it was too late to change that fact now. He had used a woman, his mother, to claim kingship, but now a woman would take it away from him; a woman gave him life, now a woman would take it away. Following Abimelech's request, the armor bearer killed him.

Verse 55-57 marks the end of the conflict when the Israelites realized that Abimelech was dead. The identity of Abimelech's men as Israelites indicates that, when Abimelech destroyed Shechem, he also got some Jewish allegiance. The

words themselves show that the rebels against whom Abimelech fought were Canaanites, because the men of Israel were distinguished from those in the tower. In the end, after Abimelech's death, his army broke up, each man going to his own home. The experiment in Canaanite-type, city-state kingship ended in failure; and it was aborted, awaiting another time for national kingship. According to verses 56 to 57, Abimelech's demise was all divine retribution: "Thus God repaid the wickedness that Abimelech had done to his father by murdering his seventy brothers. God also made the men of Shechem pay for all their wickedness. The curse of Jotham son of Jerubbaal came on them."

The curse of Jotham (Judges 9:14–20), the son of Jerubbaal, is fulfilled. It shows, Yahweh defeating Baal and that Yahweh, the true God of Israel, is the real Baal fighter. God has been the agent behind the remarkable turn of events. God also brought about Jotham's curse upon the Shechemites for their complicity in the crimes against Jerubbaal. Block cites an interesting observation by another commentator: "Abimelech has craved desperately to prove himself a worthy successor to his father by living up to one interpretation of his name (The king [Gideon] is my father), only to experience the original intention of the name (The king [divine] is my father)." As we have seen, neither human pretension (8:22–32) nor human ferocity (9:1–55) can move Yahweh from his throne. "In the end Abimelech's egomaniacal ambition must yield to the kingship of God, and with this, the story of Gideon is complete."

What is the writer's purpose for including the story of Abimelech in the Book of Judge? Whatever our perspective may be the writer believes the story of Abimelech supports his overall agenda. There are four points we should glean from this story.

1) Despite what Israel may think, God is in charge. Behind the scenes or in the forefront, it is God's agenda being accomplished. While God is only mentioned twice (vv. 23, 56), note how everything moves toward God's intended outcome. Block suggest that there are at least five things that cry out for the recognition of being God's handiwork: "(1) the emergence of Gaal out of nowhere; (2) Abimelech's initial victory over Gaal, emboldening him to attempt greater exploits; (3) the ease with which Abimelech conquers Thebez; (4) the inspiration and empowerment of the woman to drop the millstone from the tower of Thebez; (5) the guidance of the millstone to Abimelech's head."

2) This is the first time in the book of Judges, we see God operating on the "give them what they deserve" system of justice. There is no room for mercy, here, people get what they deserve. The people got the "king" they deserved and the king got the "subjects" he deserved. This chapter is a classic, biblical example of divine retribution. "Fratricide has been answered with fratricide. He who had slaughtered his brothers upon one stone has his skull crushed beneath one stone. "Note, that when Israel is her own worst enemy God seems to withdraw His grace and mercy. When Israel declared itself to be "spiritual Canaanites" by

following after Baal, they failed to realize that they absolved "Yahweh of responsibility for their well-being, bringing them under the fury of his covenant curse." No political institutions, leaders, or men, could reverse Israel's fate, "only radical repentance would reverse the fate of the nation."

From the writer's perspective the Canaanization of Israel is complete and it is spiritually downhill from here. Even with the elimination of Abimelech, the Spirit of the Lord, who had been the agent of deliverance, is now the Spirit of Retribution. At the end of the day, Israel seemingly defeated Shechem but it was Yahweh, that again defeated Baal and His people.

3) Gideon reaps what he has sown, as seen in the life of Abimelech. Abimelech's flaws come from both sides of the family. Ruling like a "Canaanite" and foregoing God's model of servant leadership, spoken by Moses in Deu 17.14-20, Abimelech seals his own ruin and the ruin of his people. The driving force behind the story of Abimelech is not kingship or its failure, it is retribution that provides the force of this chapter. It is easy to overlook the fact that Abimelech is not being punished for his lust for power or the throne, nor are the men of Shechem being punished for their support of Abimelech. "The crime in this chapter is that they have committed treachery against Gideon by murdering his sons."

4) This is another fascinating account regarding issues of gender. We see at the start "Abimelech roots his political ambition in the identity of the woman who gave him life; in the end, it is a woman who takes his life."