

# Judges 9

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## *Lesson 4 2013 Series 1*

This story focuses attention on Abimelech, who was the son of Gideon and a concubine from Shechem. It should be noted that this section does not begin with the usual formula “and the children of Israel did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord”. The lack of this formula is accounted for because this narrative does not recount the raising up of a judge by God. Abimelech was an upstart who came to power through violence and had no right whatever to rule over the people.<sup>1</sup> Abimelech represents a further degenerative step in Israel’s downward spiral. There is very little in this section to recommend Israel who is described in this section as both leaderless and also as having no expertise at making correct choices in choosing a suitable leader.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A. Cohen, ed., A. J. Rosenberg, rev., *Joshua Judges Hebrew Text and English Translation with Introductions and Commentary*, Soncino Books of the Bible series (London: The Soncino Press, 1982), p. 232.

<sup>2</sup> Tammi J. Schneider, *Judges*, in the Berit Olam series (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), p. 133.

In the previous narratives God was involved in the choice of leadership over Israel. Here the aspect that is primarily taken into consideration in choosing a leader is the family connection.<sup>3</sup> The outcome of using this criterion for choosing a leader will not work out at all well for those who choose him and ultimately not for Abimelech either as the clear indication of this section is that he will fail because God is against him. This story has received less comment than many others from Judges, but Jotham's "fable" has been much admired by readers. A recurring question that this story poses is how do divine and human causality interact. Discussion often comes to focus on the fatal millstone. "Did the woman drop it of her own accord? Or was she pushed"?<sup>4</sup>

The name "Abimelech" means in Hebrew, "the king is my father".<sup>5</sup> This seems to be connected in some way to the fact that the Israelites wanted to make Gideon king and he refused, and perhaps in time he came to regret that refusal.

It was Gideon who gave this name to his son after all. There

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<sup>3</sup> Tammi J. Schneider, *Judges*, p. 133.

<sup>4</sup> David M. Gunn, *Judges*, In the Blackwell Bible Commentary series (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), pp. 119-132.

<sup>5</sup> R. P. Gordon, "Abimelech" in J. D Douglas, ed., *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, Part 1 (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), p. 4.

is considerable confusion and controversy over the interpretation of the poem, or fable of Jotham, and who is being referred to in which part of the poetic composition. The identification of the particular flora, especially with regard to what is being referred to by the Hebrew term that is translated as “bramble” or “buck-thorn” (תֹּפֶן) is disputed.<sup>6</sup> Some see it as an actual tree *Zizyphus spina-Christi*



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<sup>6</sup> David Janzen, “Gideon’s House as the תֹּפֶן: A Proposal for Reading Jotham’s Fable”, *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, (2012), 74: 465-475.

while others identify it with the bramble or thorn bush

*Lycium europaeum*.<sup>7</sup>



All of this controversy means that you can pick up almost any resource and, to some degree get a different interpretation of the details here. By and large much of the central message is similar even between the competing perspectives. The course charted here will try to carefully

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<sup>7</sup> Michael Zohary, *Plants of the Bible: A Complete Handbook* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 155-156. Silviu Tatu, "Jotham's Fable and the Crux Interpretum in Judges IX", in *Vetus Testamentum*, 56: 105-124.

consider new discoveries and the contextual sense of the narrative within its context. At the heart of the message here are the issues of kingship, loyalty and God's role in the life of people.

Our first introduction to Abimelech comes in chapter 8 at verse 31 where we have the birth to Gideon's concubine of Abimelech, and the indication that he was given his name by his father. Chapter 9 begins with Abimelech being the central character and it wastes no time in laying out his plan to go to his mother's kinsfolk to become king. There are several aspects of this plan that are intriguing: 1. There seems to be some form of expectation that the descendants of Gideon have a claim to rule over Shechem. 2. There is the very practical question of whether it would be better to have one or seventy rulers. The role of the lords (literally - baals) of Shechem in this very important story and the issue of loyalty that was a part of the tale of Deborah and Jael once again comes into focus here too. Loyalty, though never specifically mentioned, is a critical issue in the book of Judges.

Abimelech is a real politician, and he uses his contacts well going to his mother's kinsfolk to get them to help him with his plan to rule over Shechem. He even has his talking point, "Which is better for you, that all seventy of the sons of Jerubbaal rule over you, or that one rule over you?" (verse 2). There are a great many questions not answered by the text here but there are a number of things that are central:

1. Family can divide as well as unite.
2. Abimelech chooses the pursuit of power over family loyalty. This also means that he chooses the side of his family that was Canaanite over the Israelite side of his family.
3. Mixed relationships can easily lead to mixed loyalties as in this case with Abimelech.
4. Emotion in decision-making can lead to poor decisions as in this instance when the lords of Shechem chose their kinsman to rule over them based more on emotion than reason.

The lords of Shechem give money to Abimelech from the temple of Baal-berith (lord of the covenant) to hire mercenaries that help Abimelech murder his 70 half brothers. Only Jotham, the youngest of the seventy sons of

Gideon escaped death at the hands of Abimelech and his hired killers. There is a great deal of speculation and discussion as to the identity of the god whose temple is raided in order to fund this murderous escapade, but none of it is anything more than highly speculative possibility. Of interest is one aspect of the article by Lewis and that is that it is extremely rare indeed for a deity to make a covenant with a human being outside of the biblical tradition. Most often the association of a deity with a covenant is as a witness of a covenant not as a participant with humans.<sup>8</sup> This may be noteworthy as the lords of Shechem use money from the temple of a god that was likely often called upon to witness covenants, such as the one between Israel and the people of Shechem and they use it to clearly break this covenant in hiring murderers to murder Israelites.

It is also noteworthy that these people of Shechem appear to have gone completely native in appointing a king in the first place. This was the Canaanite way of doing things, and not the Israelite way. The Israelite manner of

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<sup>8</sup> Theodore J. Lewis, "The Identity and Function of El/Baal Berith", in the *Journal of Biblical Literature* (1996), 115: 401-423.

rule was to have God as their king as stated by Gideon in 8:23. The cities of the Canaanites had kings over each of the cities. They also made Abimelech king “by the oak of the pillar of Shechem.” This was apparently a pillar such as that torn down by Abimelech’s father and burned at the beginning of the previous section. Once again we have an indication that Abimelech follows the traditions of his Canaanite ancestors rather than those of his Jewish father. This answers to some degree the reason that God did not want Israel to mix with, or leave, these peoples in their midst in the land that he would give them.

Jotham hears that his brother, the murderer of his brothers, has been made king of Shechem and he goes and stands on the top of Mount Gerizim (the mount of blessing Deuteronomy 11:29; 27:12; Joshua 8:33). It is here that his narrative of revenge begins on Shechem. This narrative is introduced with Jotham’s bitter fable on the folly of the monarchy.<sup>9</sup> His words indicate that the lords of Shechem need to listen to Jotham in order that God will listen to

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<sup>9</sup> Trent C. Butler, *Judges*, in the Word Biblical Commentary series, Vol. 8 (Nashville TN: Thomas Nelson, 2009), p. 239.



them. This long parable has been variously interpreted with regard to the meaning of its details with Janzen giving a detailed analysis of the parable or fable. He makes a good case for the “thorn-bush” or perhaps *Zizyphus spina-Christi* representing not Abimelech alone, or Gideon alone, but the house of Gideon including Abimelech.<sup>10</sup>

His solution deals with a number of interpretive difficulties one of the major items being that of giving “shade” to the trees in verse 15. How could a thorn-bush provide shade (“shadow” צֶלַל) to a tree? Some have tried to emphasize the element of the protective thorns rather than the shadow element, but the text definitely uses the term for “shadow” or “shade” and does not seem to simply refer to some form of protection provided by whatever is intended by the term (תִּצְטַח) “thorn-bush”. Verse 15 also provides good reason for indicating that the thorn-bush or bramble should be seen as the house of Gideon and not a single member of that family in that the fire, which consumes the

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<sup>10</sup> David Janzen, “Gideon’s House as the תִּצְטַח: A Proposal for Reading Jotham’s Fable”, 74: 465-475.

cedars of Lebanon originates from this source.<sup>11</sup> This could be interpreted solely as Abimelech, but then what of the role of Jotham?

Verse 16 moves out of the poetic material and back into narrative making the case that the lords of Shechem have ill-treated the house of Jerubbaal. He indicts them with the fact that his father fought, risked his life, and rescued them, from the hand of Midian (verse 17). He continues his indictment (verse 18) indicating their mistreatment of the house of Gideon by killing his sons and putting the son of his slave woman on the throne, simply because he was their kinsman. Jotham delivers his proclamation and then runs away and hides out of fear of his brother, Abimelech (verse 21).

Verse 22 begins the account of the fall of Abimelech after a rule of only 3 years. It is here at verse 23 that one sees the clear intervention of God into this situation with God sending an “evil spirit” (רוח רָעָה) between Abimelech and the lords of Shechem. Here is a chilling change between

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<sup>11</sup> David Janzen, “Gideon’s House as the דָּאָר: A Proposal for Reading Jotham’s Fable”, 74: 465-475.

the previous accounts where God sends his spirit to empower, strengthen, encourage and uphold the people; here it causes dissension and conflict.<sup>12</sup> The lords of Shechem, ever true to their nature, “dealt treacherously” with him. It never ceases to amaze me that those who partner with others in treachery seem not to be prepared for the fact that they prove to have partnered with untrustworthy individuals.

Verse 24 gives the reason for God doing what he did in sending the “evil spirit”, and that is to avenge the violence perpetrated against the 70 sons of Gideon. The indication is that blame for their deaths is to be placed firmly at the feet of Abimelech and the lords of Shechem. Verse 25 indicates the swift affect of the rift between Abimelech and the lords of Shechem as they begin to undermine the rule of Abimelech by ambushing people in the mountains to in some way harm Abimelech. The text does not make it clear why this harms him and there is a great deal of speculation,

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<sup>12</sup> Trent C. Butler, *Judges*, p. 240.

the main point is that this was done with the express purpose of doing harm to Abimelech.

The entrance of Gaal interrupts the narrative here and introduces this man whose name means “abhorrent one” and his father’s name is simply “slave”. Despite his name as “the abhorrent one, son of a slave” Gaal has been described by modern scholars as a “shrewd demagogue”:<sup>13</sup> Though certainly not shrewd enough to survive the outcome of his plans. Verse 27, the party begins as they go into the fields harvest the grapes, celebrate and then begin to ridicule Abimelech. The affect of the “evil spirit” sent by God seems to have been extremely affective and immediate. The ridicule includes a denigration of Gideon and his role in saving Shechem and then moves to challenging Abimelech to combat (verse 29). Zebul, an officer who serves Abimelech comes to hear of all this activity was angry and sends word to Abimelech about what is happening.

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<sup>13</sup> A. Cohen, ed., A. J. Rosenberg, rev., *Joshua Judges Hebrew Text and English Translation with Introductions and Commentary*, Soncino Books of the Bible series (London: The Soncino Press, 1982), p. 239

Zebul has a plan and tells Abimelech to bring his troops by night and to lie in wait in the fields and at sunrise attack the city. Gaal is standing at the city gate and apparently sees these men moving about and mentions it to Zebul, who at first discounts this (verse 36). Finally, it becomes apparent that indeed men are coming and Zebul then asks Gaal where his boast is now (verses 37-38)? Gaal then goes out with the lords of Shechem to fight with Abimelech, which does not go well for Gaal. Verse 40, Abimelech chases Gaal who flees and many fall in the battle fleeing back to the gate of the city.



Gaal's resistance is so feeble that Zebul completes the mopping up operation while Abimelech remains at this headquarters at Arumah. Now the people of Shechem are left in an extremely awkward situation. They had chosen a kinsman to rule over them, they dealt with him treacherously, which may be the reason that he chose to rule through the agency of his "mayor", Zebul. The appointed "mayor" has now dealt with Gaal. Lack of loyalty is highlighted as a central trait of the leadership of Shechem.<sup>14</sup>

Verse 42, having dealt with most of the soldiers of Shechem, Abimelech now turns his attention to the city, which he defeats quite easily, destroys, and then salts the ground. At verse 46 we have a new appellation given to the lords of Shechem; they are now called the lords of the "Tower" of Shechem. This seems to indicate a separation between the stronghold, the city, and these lords.<sup>15</sup> The tower must have been a structure of some considerable size as contained more than a thousand people (verse 49) who

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<sup>14</sup> Trent C. Butler, *Judges*, p. 248.

<sup>15</sup> Trent C. Butler, *Judges*, p. 249.

all die after Abimelech sets fire to it using brush gathered and placed at its base.

In a further report we are told that Abimelech continues his campaign of revenge on what appears to be the unsuspecting village of Thebez. Some have conjectured this was an attempt by Abimelech to expand his kingdom. At any rate he attacks the city, which also contains a tower and he seeks to repeat what he had done at the other tower and when he comes near to it with his wood, a certain, unnamed woman throws a millstone down and crushes Abimelech's skull. In order to save himself from the embarrassment of being killed by a woman, he has his armor bearer kill him. Clearly this strategy, to save him from the legacy of being killed by a woman did not work well, as we still primarily remember the unnamed woman as the cause of Abimelech's ignominious death.

It is here (verse 55) that we are told that the Israelites saw that Abimelech was dead and went home. They are involved in all of this intrigue and killing though we are not specifically told how. The main message of this chapter

now comes as we are given the reason for the calamity that has befallen both Abimelech and the people of Shechem. Because of their “wickedness” and the crime of killing the seventy sons of Gideon the curse of Jotham is fulfilled. This is a powerful lesson against doing evil. God will insure that punishment comes for those who pursue their own interests using whatever means they deem will get them what they want. The result is failure, even if it is not apparent for a season.



## Synopsis

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This chapter gives us the story of the brief descent into trying to choose their own leader, without the assistance of God and even his resistance. Abimelech, who has been named “my father is king” by his father Gideon seeks to pursue a claim to kingship among the people of Shechem, who had offered kingship to Gideon. He does this through intrigue and murder seeking to exploit his Canaanite ancestors living in Shechem to assist in his efforts. He does convince the “lords of Shechem” to appoint him king and they give him money from the temple of “Baal Berith to hire mercenaries to murder his 70 half-brothers, apparently to insure his place of kingship.

He misses the youngest of Gideon’s sons who goes to Mount Gerizim where he pronounces a curse upon Abimelech and the lords of Shechem that will indeed be brought to pass by God. In the meantime, Abimelech has a short and troubled reign that ends up with him destroying

Shechem and then he himself is destroyed, really at the hands of a woman throwing a millstone down and crushing his skull. All of this is perpetrated through an evil spirit that brings enmity between Abimelech and the lords of Shechem because of their wickedness.

## Main Points

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1. Rule without justice will not end well.
2. God is directly involved in the lives of men and especially when acts of injustice call him to act.
3. Without God's blessings the efforts of men will ultimately fail.

# Questions

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1. Do you think God is involved in the world today?  
Why or why do you not believe that he is?
2. Why do you think men seek power even through injustice?
3. Why do men seek to have an earthly ruler rather than accepting the kingship of God?
4. What do you believe this story teaches us about human nature?
5. What do you think this story teaches us about the nature of God?
6. How can we today listen to God as our king?
7. Why do people feel lost without a visible leadership structure?
8. Why do you think dishonorable people still seek to die an honorable death?
9. Who is supposed to lead us today?