

# Judges 9: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Judges chapter 9 Now Abimelech the son of Jeroboam went to Shechem, to his mother's relatives, and said to them, and to the whole clan of his mother's family, Say in the ears of all the leaders of Shechem, Which is better for you, that all seventy of the sons of Jeroboam rule over you, or that one rule over you? Remember also that I am your bone and your flesh.

And his mother's relatives spoke all these words on his behalf in the ears of all the leaders of Shechem, and their hearts inclined to follow Abimelech, for they said, He is our brother. And they gave him seventy pieces of silver out of the house of Baal-bereth, with which Abimelech hired worthless and reckless fellows who followed him.

And he went to his father's house at Ophrah, and killed his brothers, the sons of Jeroboam, seventy men on one stone. But Jotham, the youngest son of Jeroboam, was left, for he hid himself.

And all the leaders of Shechem came together, and all Beth-Milo, and they went and made Abimelech king by the oak of the pillar at Shechem. When it was told to Jotham, he went and stood on top of Mount Gerizim, and cried aloud, and said to them, Listen to me, you leaders of Shechem, that God may listen to you. The trees once went out to anoint a king over them, and they said to the olive tree, Rain over us. But the olive tree said to them, Shall I leave my abundance, by which gods and men are honoured, and go hold sway over the trees? And the trees said to the fig tree, You come and rain over us. But the fig tree said to them, Shall I leave my sweetness and my good fruit, and go hold sway over the trees? And the trees said to the vine, You come and rain over us. But the vine said to them, Shall I leave my wine that cheers God and men, and go hold sway over the trees? Then all the trees said to the bramble, You come and rain over us. And the bramble said to the trees, If in good faith you are anointing me king over you, then come and take refuge in my shade. But if not, let fire come out of the bramble and devour the cedars of Lebanon.

Now therefore, if you acted in good faith and integrity when you made Abimelech king, and if you have dealt well with Jeroboam and his house, and have done to him as his deeds deserved, for my father fought for you and risked his life and delivered you from the hand of Midian. And if you have risen up against my father's house this day, and have killed his son, seventy men on one stone, and have made Abimelech the son of his female servant, king over the leaders of Shechem, because he is your relative. If you have acted in good faith and integrity with Jeroboam and with his house this day, then rejoice in Abimelech, and let him also rejoice in you. But if not, let fire come out from Abimelech, and devour the leaders of Shechem and Beth-Milo, and let fire come out from the leaders of Shechem, and from Beth-Milo, and devour Abimelech. And Jotham ran away, and fled, and went to Beir, and lived there, because of Abimelech his brother. Abimelech ruled over Israel three years, and God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the leaders of Shechem. And the leaders of Shechem dealt treacherously with Abimelech, that the violence done to the seventy sons of Jeroboam might come, and their blood be laid on Abimelech their brother, who killed them, and on the men of Shechem, who strengthened his hands to kill his brothers. And the leaders of Shechem put men in ambush against him on the mountaintops, and they robbed all who passed by them along that way. And it was told to

[ 3 : 24 ] Abimelech. And Gael the son of Ebed moved into Shechem with his relatives, and the leaders of Shechem put confidence in him. And they went out into the field, and gathered the grapes from their vineyards, and trod them, and held a festival. And they went into the house of their god, and ate and drank, and reviled Abimelech. And Gael the son of Ebed said, Who is Abimelech, and who are we of Shechem, that we should serve him? Is he not the son of Jeroboam, and is not Zebul his officer? Serve the men of Hamor the father of Shechem, but why should we serve him? Would that this people were under my hand. Then I would remove Abimelech. I would say to Abimelech, Increase your army and come out.

When Zebul the ruler of the city heard the words of Gael the son of Ebed, his anger was kindled, and he sent messengers to Abimelech secretly, saying, Behold Gael the son of Ebed, and his relatives have come to Shechem, and they are stirring up the city against you. Now therefore go by night you and the people who are with you, and set an ambush in the field. Then in the morning, as soon as the sun is up, rise early and rush upon the city. And when he and the people who are with him come out against you, you may do to them as your hand finds to do. So Abimelech and all the men who are with him rose up by night, and set an ambush against Shechem in four companies. And Gael the son of Ebed went out, and stood in the entrance of the gate of the city. And Abimelech and the people who were with him rose from the ambush. And when Gael saw the people, he said to Zebul, Look, people are coming down from the mountaintops. And Zebul said to him, You mistake the shadow of the mountains for men.

Gael spoke again, and said, Look, people are coming down from the centre of the land, and one company is coming from the direction of the Diviner's Oak. Then Zebul said to him, Where is your mouth now, you who said, Who is Abimelech, that we should serve him?

Are not these the people whom you despised? Go out now and fight with them. And Gael went out at the head of the leaders of Shechem, and fought with Abimelech. And Abimelech chased him, and he fled before him. And many fell wounded up to the entrance of the gate. And Abimelech lived at Aruma, and Zebul drove out Gael and his relatives, so that they could not dwell at Shechem.

On the following day the people went out into the field, and Abimelech was told, He took his people and divided them into three companies, and set an ambush in the fields. And he looked and saw the people coming out of the city. So he rose against them and killed them.

[ 5 : 46 ] And Abimelech and the company that was with him rushed forward, and stood at the entrance of the gate of the city, while the two companies rushed upon all who were in the field, and killed them. And Abimelech fought against the city all that day. He captured the city, and killed the people who were in it. And he razed the city, and sowed it with salt. When all the leaders of the Tower of Shechem heard of it, they entered the stronghold of the house of Elbereth. Abimelech was told that all the leaders of the Tower of Shechem were gathered together. And Abimelech went up to Mount Zalmon, he and all the people who were with him. And Abimelech took an axe in his hand, and cut down a bundle of brushwood, and took it up, and laid it on his shoulder. And he said to the men who were with him, What you have seen me do, hurry and do as I have done. So every one of the people cut down his bundle, and following Abimelech put it against the stronghold, and they set the stronghold on fire over them, so that all the people of the Tower of Shechem also died, about one thousand men and women.

Then Abimelech went to Thebes, and encamped against Thebes, and captured it. But there was a strong tower within the city, and all the men and women and all the leaders of the city fled to it, and shut themselves in. And they went up to the roof of the tower. And Abimelech came to the tower, and fought against it, and drew near to the door of the tower to burn it with fire. And a certain woman threw an upper millstone on Abimelech's head, and crushed his skull. Then he called quickly to the young man his armour-bearer, and said to him, Draw your sword and kill me, lest they say of me, A woman killed him. And his young man thrust him through, and he died. And when the men of Israel saw that Abimelech was dead, everyone departed to his home. Thus God returned the evil of Abimelech, which he committed against his father in killing his seventy brothers. And God also made all the evil of the men of Shechem return on their heads, and upon them came the curse of Jotham the son of Jeroboam.

In Judges chapter 9 we get to know the character of Abimelech, the son of Gideon, by his Shechemite concubine. Abimelech means my father is king. Gideon rejected the kingship when he was offered it, but this name suggests that he did not entirely reject the pretensions of it. It is a good name for a prince, and it's also the name of a number of Canaanite kings in the book of Genesis.

Abimelech is the son of a concubine, possibly a Canaanite concubine. She is from Ephraimite territory, whereas Gideon was a man of Manasseh. After the death of Gideon, the Israelites had made Baal-bereth, lord of the covenant, their god. And the worship of Baal-bereth seems to have been concentrated in the city of Shechem. Shechem was a Levitical city in Joshua chapter 21 verses 20 to 21.

As to the rest of the Kohathites belonging to the Kohathite clans of the Levites, the cities allotted to them were out of the tribe of Ephraim. To them were given Shechem, the city of refuge for the manslayer, with its pasture lands in the hill country of Ephraim. This might make us wonder what has happened to the Levites. Their city of refuge has become a site of idolatry, a center of idolatry.

[ 8 : 51 ] Abimelech presents himself as one who ought to be king over them. He sees himself as their flesh and their blood, and so for this reason he is an apt ruler. And they support him. They support him with the coffers of their god Baal-bereth. And the money that he gets from this false god he uses to destroy 70 of his brethren. His claim for kingship arises out of the sacrificial murder of his 70 brothers, all funded out of the coffers of Baal-bereth. He kills his brothers on one stone in Ophrah, his father's house. Could this be the same stone as the altar? One way or another it is an ugly reversal. Jotham, the youngest son of Jeroboam, or Gideon, escaped, and he turns up later on.

Abimelech is made king by the oak of the pillar of Shechem, and we previously encountered this place in the narrative. In Genesis chapter 12 verse 6, Abram passed through the land to the place of Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. In Genesis chapter 35 verse 4, so they gave to Jacob all the foreign gods that they had, and the rings that were in their ears.

Jacob hid them under the terebinth tree that was near Shechem. Joshua chapter 24 verses 25 to 26, so Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and put in place statutes and rules for them at Shechem. And Joshua wrote these words in the book of the law of God. And he took a large stone and set it up there under the terebinth that was by the sanctuary of the Lord. On each of these previous occasions, the terebinth, or the oak at Shechem, plays an important role in covenant establishment or renewal. And now it's being used for this perverse act of creating Abimelech, the slayer of his brothers, as the king over the Shechemites, who have committed themselves to the idolatry of Baal-Bereth. At this point Jotham, who has escaped, brings a parable to the people. He stands on Mount Gerizim. It's the mountain of blessing. This is a gracious act of God. If they listen, they will be blessed. In his parable, the trees are looking for another tree to rule over them.

And they ask each tree in turn, and they reject. All of the great and good and worthy trees are offered rule, but they all have other productive things that they are invested in, and they do not wish to rule. Perhaps they are a bit apathetic. Perhaps they don't want the commitment. One way or another, the bramble, the least worthy of all the trees, is the one that actually wants to wield authority. The trees clearly represent men of differing character, with the bramble representing the cursed man or the man who brings the curse. The bramble doesn't seem to be a fitting tree to provide shade to others, as a kingly tree was supposed to do. Brambles also burn very easily and spread destructive fire. The bramble's desire for rule is cautionary. Often it's the people who are least suitable for authority who desire it the most. Jotham's parable speaks of fire coming out from the bramble, and devouring the cedars of Lebanon, the proud and the great trees of the land.

Jotham here acts as a sort of prophet, declaring a prophetic type of judgment. Jotham's name might mean the Lord is loyal, and loyalty and disloyalty are key themes of his message. Now therefore, if you acted in good faith and integrity when you made Abimelech king, and then again, if you have acted in good faith and integrity with Jeroboam and with his house this day, then rejoice in Abimelech, and let him also rejoice in you. Those expressions, good faith and integrity, take up the language of a previous occasion at this same location, the language of Joshua chapter 24 verse 14. Now therefore fear the Lord and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness. Put away the gods that your father served beyond the river and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. They have not, however, dealt faithfully with the house of Jeroboam, with the descendants of the man who delivered them from the Midianites. This is related to their treatment of the Lord in chapter 8 verses 34 to 35. And the people of Israel did not remember the Lord their God, who had delivered them from the hand of all their enemies on every side, and they did not show steadfast love to the family of Jeroboam, that is Gideon, in return for all the good that he had done to Israel. If they have not been faithful, Jotham calls for fire to come out from Abimelech, and to devour Shechem and Beth-Milo, and for fire to come out from Shechem and Beth-Milo, and to devour Abimelech. Jotham then flees and settles in Beer. After three years, the Lord sends an evil spirit between Abimelech and the Shechemites.

[ 13 : 34 ] God brings discord to the wicked. Now this may be an actual evil spirit, or it might be a spiritual force by which the Lord is creating disunity and opposition between the two groups. The Shechemites prove to be treacherous and troublesome. They act like bandits in the mountains, causing trouble for Abimelech. Whether they set ambushes in the mountains designed to attack Abimelech himself, or whether they are doing it for the sake of Abimelech, it isn't entirely clear. The result is that the land is brought to a sorry state, similar to that in the time of Deborah, where people can't move around freely. Then Gale comes on the scene, and the Shechemite rulers turn to him. They have a harvest festival and revile Abimelech. Gale argues that they should be serving a Canaanite, a son of Hamor. Remember that Hamor, the father of Shechem, was the leader of the Shechemites back in Genesis chapter 34, when it was a Canaanite city. Abimelech had already claimed that he was a fitting ruler, as one who was kin of the Shechemites by his mother. Presumably she was a Canaanite. Now Gale reminds them that Canaanite mother or no, Abimelech is still a son of Jeroboam. Zebal, Abimelech's right-hand man and the ruler of the city, hears about this and sends messengers to Abimelech. Abimelech then sends an ambush against the city. He divides his men into four companies, according to the council of

Zebal. Gale sees men coming down from the mountaintops. He goes out to fight the men of Abimelech, but he is defeated by Abimelech and by Zebal, who supports him. The next day, Abimelech ambushes the men of Shechem as they go out to their fields, trapping them and killing them. He then razes the city and sows it with salt. Fire has come out from the bramble of Abimelech and destroyed the men of Shechem. The ambushes of Abimelech remind us of the ambushes set by his father Gideon against the Midianites, especially when he divided his men into three companies. James Bajon notes the contrast between Gideon's men with their empty pitchers and Abimelech's band, who are described as empty men.

The rulers have taken refuge in the tower of Elberith, the Baal that they have served. Abimelech gets bundles of brushwood with all of his men and burns the tower down with all within it.

The manner of his destruction of the Shechemites should remind us of Jotham's parable. Irrespective of Abimelech's wickedness, the Lord is also striking a great blow against Baal here and his worship within the land. Abimelech then goes on to attack Thebes, where the men, women and leaders hole up in the tower. While besieging the tower, a woman drops an upper millstone on Abimelech's head. The one man to rule them all of verse 2 is slain by the one woman of verse 53.

He has killed his brothers on one stone, now one stone falls upon him. He is also a serpent whose head is crushed by a woman. Sisera's head was also crushed by a woman using a tool as a weapon, as Jael went through his head with a tent peg. Abimelech does not want the shame of being killed by a woman, so he asks his armour bearer to run him through with his sword. However, the deed of the woman is recorded for us. Abimelech's death might also bring to mind the death of Saul, which is similar in certain ways. The evil of Abimelech, for what he did to his brothers, returns on his head, quite literally, and the evil of the men of Shechem returns upon their heads too, according to the curse of Jotham. A question to consider. Of which defeated king in the book of Judges might Abimelech remind us, and why? Pay attention to the numbers. What might we learn from the comparison between the two?