

Judges 9:1-22

The Rise of Abimelech

Gideon's final error of idolatry - as well as the family strife so often associated with having many wives - will lead to retribution on his house through Abimelech, his son by his concubine.

The assumption is that Abimelech's mother was a Canaanite concubine, and presumably a Baal worshipper. Abimelech had a foot in both worlds. So this story is also a warning against intermarriage with the Canaanites - **Deuteronomy 7:3**.

The city of Shechem looms large in Israelite history.

In **Genesis 12:6–8**, Abraham reached the oak or "great tree of Moreh" at Shechem and offered sacrifice nearby. He "built an altar to the Lord who had appeared to him... and had given that land to his descendants" at Shechem. The Bible states that on this occasion, God confirmed the covenant he had first made with Abraham in Harran, regarding the possession of the land of Canaan. In Jewish tradition, "Shechem" was understood in terms of the Hebrew word *shékém* – "shoulder, saddle" - corresponding to the mountainous configuration of the place.

Shechem also was the scene of an incident that caused strife between the sons of Jacob. Simeon and Levi avenged their sister Dinah's rape by "Shechem the son of Hamor the Hivite, the prince of the land." (**Genesis 34**)

According to Joshua 21:20–21 it was located in the tribal territorial allotment of the tribe of Ephraim (**Joshua 21:20–21**). It was designated a Levite city and given to the Kohathites.

It was also the site of Jacob's Well (**Genesis 33:18–19**) and the tomb of Joseph.

Joshua assembled the Israelites at Shechem - where curses and blessings had been announced from nearby Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal - and asked them to choose between serving the GOD of Abraham who had delivered them from Egypt, or the false gods which their ancestors had served (**Joshua 24**). Joshua then erected a memorial stone "under the oak that was by the sanctuary of the Lord" in Shechem.

In the time of the judges, Shechem was probably a mixed population of Israelite and Canaanite living side by side in a sort of armed neutrality, though with a mutual dislike, which could at any time break out in tumults.

In the time after Solomon, Shechem became the capital of the Northern Kingdom of Israel (**1 Kings 4**). After the exile, Shechem became the capital of the hated Samaritans.

Based on **John 4:15**, scholars have argued that Shechem is the Samaritan city of

Sychar described in the Gospel of John, where Jesus met the woman at the well (Jacob's Well).

The city is immersed in sacred history.

In the time of the judges, though, Shechem may have reverted to Canaanite/Hivite control - or there was at least a mixed population with Ephraimites, Canaanites and Hivites there. It stood as a type of the confused state of the whole Promised Land in the time of the judges, where Baal and Yahweh were being worshipped.

Abimelech is a name that surfaces several times throughout Israel's history.

Abimelech = "Father-King", "My father is king," or "Father of a king."

It is a title for kings in the land of Canaan. The Amarna tablets from mid-14th century B.C. mention an Egyptian governor of Tyre similarly named *Abimilki*.

Two other Abimelechs appear in the wife-sister narratives Genesis 20 with Abraham and Sarah and in Genesis 26 with Isaac and Rebekah. In these stories, Abimelech of Gerar is attracted to Sarah, Abraham in fear says she is his sister, God curses Abimelech until, finally learning the truth, tells God "In the simplicity of my heart and the innocency of my hands have I done this" and he returns her to Abraham. A similar event happens with his son and Isaac and Rebekah. Abimelech was referred to as a righteous Gentile (Midrash on Psalm 34). He is called "King of the Philistines" because Gerar later was in the territory of the Philistines.

In **1 Samuel 21**, David feigns madness to escape from Achish, king of Gath. But in a reference to this incident in **Psalm 34**, Achish is referred to as Abimelech.

Abimelech's Plot

Judges 9:1-2 - "And Abimelech the son of Jerubbaal went to Shechem unto his mother's brethren, and communed with them, and with all the family of the house of his mother's father, saying, Speak, I pray you, in the ears of all the men of Shechem, Whether is better for you, either that all the sons of Jerubbaal, which are threescore and ten persons, reign over you, or that one reign over you? Remember also that I am your bone and your flesh."

Perhaps some years had elapsed since Gideon's death - time for idolatry to spread and Abimelech's ambition to grow.

The Bible does not count Abimelech among the Judges. He is not credited with having saved Israel, nor did God give any sanction to his rule. It says he ruled [not 'judged'] over Israel three years (**Judges 9:22**). He never appeals to God or even mentions Him.

First, there is no indication that Gideon's 70 sons had any desire or inclination to rule,

either as kings or judges. Gideon had already renounced kingship and a dynasty.

Abimelech refers to Gideon as Jerubbaal not to honor his overthrowing of the altar of Baal, but to incite the residents of Shechem because they were zealous worshippers of Baal. He's trying to turn them against the legitimate heirs of Gideon's house, so using the name Jerubbaal emphasizes Gideon's original contempt for their favorite deity. Abimelech wanted to make the contrast distinct - he was one of them, "your bone and your flesh." Abimelech never mentions God or even Baal, and was solely interested in power.

If Gideon gave Abimelech (father/king) his name, it could have been the seed of the prideful and treacherous character he developed, and the plot that was being hatched.

Finally, according to **Joshua 21:20–21**, Shechem was located within the territory of Ephraim. So this episode might be a continuation of the division between Ephraim and Manasseh we saw last week, that started at the blessing of the two children by Jacob (**Genesis 48:13-19**). The tribe of Ephraim, still offended at the judgeship of Gideon and Manasseh's prominence, possibly had a hand in supporting Abimelech's plan.

Judges 9:4 - "And they gave him threescore and ten pieces of silver out of the house of Baal-berith, wherewith Abimelech hired vain and light persons, which followed him."

The 70 pieces of silver reflect the 30 pieces of silver the chief priests paid for Judas to betray Jesus (**Matthew 26:15**). They were drawn from the house of Baal-berith, the temple of "Baal of the covenant."

The thugs Abimelech hired with that money were "vain" = *rêq* - empty, worthless fellows. The word vain is from the same root as *Raca*.

- **Matthew 5:22** - "whoever shall say to his brother, 'Raca!' shall be in danger of the council"

They were also "light" = *pâchaz* - frothy, like boiling water, leaping up and then as quickly disappearing. Rashi adds that they were "Hasty in their actions, without meditation" or reflection. The word was applied to Reuben in **Genesis 49:4** - "unstable as water."

In a sense Abimelech and his freelance lawless vagabonds were the antitype of Jesus and His disciples, bent on treachery and grasping for power and gain.

- **Luke 10:1** - "'After these things the Lord appointed other seventy also, and sent them two and two before his face into every city and place, whither he himself would come.'"

Judges 9:5 - "And he went unto his father's house at Ophrah, and slew his brethren the sons of Jerubbaal, being threescore and ten persons, upon one stone: notwithstanding yet Jotham the youngest son of Jerubbaal was left; for he hid himself."

"upon one stone" carries the sense of a sacrifice. Perhaps this stone was the altar previously set up by Gideon - now defiled by the blood of his household in a horrible crime. In that case, they were imagined to be sacrifices to Baal, in revenge of the sacrifice of the bullock prepared for Baal (**Judges 6:25**) and to expiate the crime of Gideon, as these idolaters counted it, by the sacrifice of all his sons.

This was the sin of Cain - the murder of a brother - multiplied many times over.

Abimelech by this vile wickedness set a fatal precedent, which was followed again and again in the kingdom of Israel by Baasha (**1 Kings 15:29**), Zimri (**1 Kings 16:11**), Jehu (**2 Kings 10:7**), and probably by other kings (**2 Kings 15**); and by Athaliah (**2 Kings 11:1**) in the kingdom of Judah. Herod also put to death most of his kinsmen, and some of his sons. Seneca says, "*Nec regna socium ferre, nec taedae sciunt*" — "neither realms nor weddings admit a sharer" (Agam. 259).

- *Ellicot's Commentary*

The ingratitude of the Israelites who permitted Abimelech to murder the children of their benefactor Gideon was counted unto them as though they had forsaken God; ingratitude is as grave a sin as idolatry. (Midrash Tanhuma Yelammedenu in Yalkut II, 64.)

Abimelech's Coronation

Judges 9:6 - "And all the men of Shechem gathered together, and all the house of Millo, and went, and made Abimelech king, by the plain of the pillar that was in Shechem.

The "house of Millo" is not a person's name, but means the warriors who occupied the fortress or fortified tower in or near Shechem. There was also a Millo in Jerusalem, which was strengthened by Solomon.

"the plain of the pillar that was in Shechem" - "near the terebinth (or oak tree) of the monument which is in Shechem."

This was the Oak of Moreh under which Abraham had spread his tent and where he had built an altar (**Genesis 12:6**). There God revealed Himself to Abraham with the promise to give Canaan to his descendants, whereupon Abraham responded by building his first altar to the Lord in Canaan. Also under which Jacob had made his family bury their idolatrous earrings and amulets (**Genesis 35:4**). Joshua took a great stone and "set it up under the oak that was by the sanctuary of the Lord" at Shechem (**Joshua 24:1, 25, 26**) This stone was the "pillar" referred to in **verse 6**.

It is alluded to later by Gaal as the "terebinth of the enchanters" or teachers - *Meoninim* - mentioned in **Judges 9:37**. Even the Baal worshippers treated it with veneration.

Abimelech now defiled this sacred area by making it the place of his coronation. The true ruler of Israel at this time was God. Whenever we rebel against God's control over

our lives, Abimelech is waiting to take over in the form of Satan acting through our own evil inclination and sin nature.

- **Romans 6:16** - "Know ye not, that to whom ye yield yourselves servants to obey, his servants ye are to whom ye obey; whether of sin unto death, or of obedience unto righteousness?"

As the song says, "Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord, but you gotta serve somebody..."

A similar ambition, "I will ascend into heaven!" turned Lucifer into a fallen angel (**Isaiah 14:13**), and "Is not this great Babylon, that I have built" turned a Nebuchadnezzar into an animal (**Daniel 4:28-37**).

Abimelech is starting to look like an Antichrist figure, a liar, usurper and lawless tyrant.

Jotham's Parable and Curse

Judges 9:7 - "And when they told it to Jotham, he went and stood in the top of mount Gerizim, and lifted up his voice, and cried, and said unto them, Hearken unto me, ye men of Shechem, that God may hearken unto you."

Jotham, Gideon's youngest son, climbs to the top of Mount Gerizim, the mountain where his tribe of Manasseh was positioned originally (**Deuteronomy 27:11-13**) when the blessings and curses were delivered by the Levites. A promontory where he stood looked down over Shechem.

Josephus says that Jotham seized an opportunity when there was a public feast at Shechem, and the whole multitude were gathered there. Somehow he was able to deliver his message to the Shechemites without being pursued and caught.

Judges 9:8-15 describes his parable.

The rabbis say the olive tree, fig tree, and vine represent the judges Othniel, Deborah, and Gideon.

But generally the olive tree, fig tree, and vine represent those who bring forth fruit and blessing for the community in the calling appointed for them by God, and who promote the prosperity of the people.

Oil, figs, and wine were the most valuable productions of the land of Canaan, whereas the briar was good for nothing except to burn.

The idea of a king here is one who is "promoted over" his fellows - or "floats" or is "waved" up above others in a desire to lord it over his fellows. But this always comes with restlessness and distraction - he's always afraid of losing his power, with the result

that he does little good, and produces very little fruit.

The only one who would be attracted to that would be a thorn bush or briar, someone already worthless and not producing any fruit anyway.

Judges 9:14-15 - "Then said all the trees unto the bramble, Come thou, and reign over us. And the bramble said unto the trees, If in truth ye anoint me king over you, then come and put your trust in my shadow: and if not, let fire come out of the bramble, and devour the cedars of Lebanon."

The words of the bramble, "Trust in my shadow," contain a deep irony. The briar, which has nothing but thorns upon it, does not even cast sufficient shadow for any one to lie down in its shade or be protected from the burning heat of the sun. It is a worthless refuge.

The cedars of Lebanon were the largest and noblest of trees. Thorns easily catch fire (see Exodus 22:6). The most insignificant and most worthless man can be the cause of harm to the mightiest and most distinguished, which the Shechemites were soon to discover.

Judges 9:19-20 - "If ye then have dealt truly and sincerely with Jerubbaal and with his house this day, then rejoice ye in Abimelech, and let him also rejoice in you: But if not, let fire come out from Abimelech, and devour the men of Shechem, and the house of Millo; and let fire come out from the men of Shechem, and from the house of Millo, and devour Abimelech."

Ultimately, Abimelech's problem goes back to the ephod Gideon created glorifying the great victory over the Midianites. It "became a snare unto Gideon, and to his house" (**Judges 8:27**), pointing Abimelech toward a pursuit of control and power, gain and glory.

But as Jesus told us:

- **Matthew 23:12** - "Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted."

We'll see Abimelech's fall, and the fulfillment of Jotham's prophecy, in the rest of the chapter.