

Judges 9:22-57

The Fall of Abimelech

Judges 9:22 - "When Abimelech had reigned three years over Israel,"

"reigned" - The verb is here *sûr*, not *malak*, as in Judges 9:6; It implies taking power by vanquishing and contention, to exercise dominion. It was a tyrannical despotism. Parts of "Israel"- possibly the tribes of Ephraim and half Manasseh - may have succumbed to his dominion for a time, but Abimelech was only actually accepted as king by Shechem and the surrounding area.

The same word is used in Hosea:

- **Hosea 8:4** - "They have set up kings, but not by me: they have made princes, (*sûr*) and I knew it not: of their silver and their gold have they made them idols, that they may be cut off."

Josephus says that Jotham - after addressing the Shechemites with his parable of the trees - lay hidden in the mountains three years for fear of Abimelech.

The rabbis said God allowed Abimelech to reign for three years as a reward for the modesty of his father Gideon, who in a "tripartite" sentence refused the royal crown offered him by his people:

- **Judges 8:23** - "And Gideon said unto them,
1 - I will not rule over you,
2 - neither shall my son rule over you:
3 - the LORD shall rule over you."

Judges 9:23 - "Then God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the men of Shechem; and the men of Shechem dealt treacherously with Abimelech:"

Rashi - "A spirit of hatred"

i.e. God lifted his protective hand and gave Satan permission to sow suspicion, discord, hatred and jealousy between them.

An Evil Spirit

"spirit" = *ruach* - breath, wind, spirit. This can refer to a personal being or demon, but also an evil temperament. Caleb is said to have had "another spirit" than the rest of the spies (**Numbers 14:24**).

In a similar way, an evil spirit came upon Saul (**1 Samuel 16:14-15**; **1 Samuel 18:10**).

- **1 Samuel 16:14** - "But the Spirit of the LORD departed from Saul, and an evil spirit

from the LORD troubled him."

This shows God's sovereignty over all. But it also raises troubling questions about evil and God's character. Can God condone or instigate evil?

"evil" = *ra* - it can mean everything from ethical evil, bad, pain, harm, wickedness to calamity, distress, misery. With an article *ra* means "the Evil one" referring to Satan.

- **Amos 3:6** - "If a ram's horn sounds in a city, do the people not tremble? If calamity (*ra*) comes to a city, has not the LORD caused it?"

- **Job 2:10** - "What? shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil (*ra*)? In all this did not Job sin with his lips."

- **Isaiah 45:7** - "I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil (*ra*): I the LORD do all these things."

- **Lamentation 3:38** - "Who has spoken and it came to pass, unless the Lord has ordained it? Do not both evil (*ra*) and good come from the mouth of the Most High? Why should any mortal man complain, in view of his sins?"

Perhaps the strangest indication of this is recorded in 1 Kings in a vision by Micaiah:

- **1 Kings 22:19-22** - "I saw the LORD sitting on His throne, and all the host of heaven standing by Him on His right and on His left. And the LORD said, 'Who will entice Ahab to march up and fall at Ramoth-gilead?' And one suggested this, and another that. Then a spirit (*ruach*) came forward, stood before the LORD, and said, 'I will entice him.' 'By what means?' asked the LORD. And he replied, 'I will go out and be a lying spirit in the mouths of all his prophets.' 'You will surely entice him and prevail,' said the LORD. 'Go and do it.'"

Should this be taken literally? Is this a good spirit or an evil spirit? Or is vision describing a spiritual truth of God's universal control by depicting personal agents carrying out His directions?

- **Job 1:6-7** - "Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan came also among them"

Jesus cast out evil spirits or demons who speak and react as beings, and Jews of his day believed that all evil was directly the consequence of the actions of demons, myriads of which permeate the air.

This is counterbalanced by the Jewish idea of the "evil inclination" within the human heart:

- **James 1:13-15** - "Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man: But every man is tempted,

when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed. Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death."

The bottom line of all this is to assure us that God is in control, that events are not careening randomly in time. But from our own viewpoint we are responsible for faith, obedience and repentance. We must agree with God voluntarily at every moment, deny our own control and submit to God's rule over our life.

Judges 9:24 - "That the cruelty done to the threescore and ten sons of Jerubbaal might come, and their blood be laid upon Abimelech their brother, which slew them; and upon the men of Shechem, which aided him in the killing of his brethren."

That the blame for the injustice done, and the bloodguiltiness incurred might be recompensed upon the head of Abimelech and the Shechemites who supplied him funds.

This happens by their fighting against each other, as happened with the Midianites, Amalekites and the children of the east in Gideon's victory.

Blood speaks - The blood of Abel

- **Genesis 4:9-12** - "The voice of your brother's blood is crying (*ṣā'āq*) to me from the ground"

Instances of injustice speak and cry out (*ṣā'āq*) to God in the same way:

- **Exodus 22:22-23** - "You shall not mistreat any widow or fatherless child. If you do mistreat them, and they cry out (*ṣā'āq*) to me, I will surely hear their cry,"

Jesus said the blood of the murders of the prophets and wise men throughout history by the Jews would come due in that generation:

- **Matthew 23:35** - "That upon you may come all the righteous blood shed upon the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel unto the blood of Zacharias son of Barachias, whom ye slew between the temple and the altar."

In biblical terms, innocent blood "seethes" and cries out to God and cannot rest until the injustice is vindicated. It is a powerful metaphor.

Judges 9:25 - "And the men of Shechem set liers in wait for him in the top of the mountains, and they robbed all that came along that way by them: and it was told Abimelech."

"for him" does not necessarily mean "to seize him," but means "to his disadvantage" - It made it appear he was not in control.

Josephus says that Abimelech was expelled from Shechem, and even from the tribe of Ephraim (Antt. v. 1, § 3). But more probably he was living back in Ophrah, six miles from Shechem, or Arumah (verse 41) also nearby Shechem. He had appointed Zebul to remain in Shechem as ruler of the city.

Gaal stirs up the Shechemites

Judges 9:26 - "And Gaal the son of Ebed came with his brethren, and went over to Shechem: and the men of Shechem put their confidence in him."

We don't know who Gaal was - neither his tribe or nationality or place of origin. Josephus says he was "a certain chief, with his soldiers and kinsmen." He was a powerful brigand possibly from the other side of the Jordan. The men of Shechem apparently recruited him to help them oppose Abimelech.

Rashi thinks he was a Gentile, and from **verse 28** it looks as if he was a Canaanite, descendant of Hamor, prince of Shechem in the times of Jacob, who, since the expulsion of the Canaanites, his family had retired to some distant parts.

"Gaal Ben-Ebed" ("loathing son of a slave") sounds like some contemptuous distortion of his real name.

From this point on, the chapter describes the working out of Jotham's prophecy. The two evil sides in this story - the Canaanite Gaal and the tyrant Abimelech - end up destroying each other.

Judges 9:27-28 - "And they went out into the fields, and gathered their vineyards, and trode the grapes, and made merry, and went into the house of their god, and did eat and drink, and cursed Abimelech. And Gaal the son of Ebed said, Who is Abimelech, and who is Shechem, that we should serve him? is not he the son of Jerubbaal? and Zebul his officer? serve the men of Hamor the father of Shechem: for why should we serve him?"

Judges 9:29 - "And would to God this people were under my hand! then would I remove Abimelech. And he said to Abimelech, Increase thine army, and come out."

A Double-Cross

Zebul informs Abimelech of this development, and proposes he set a trap for Gaal with a surprise attack.

Judges 9:32-33 - "Now therefore up by night, thou and the people that is with thee, and lie in wait in the field: And it shall be, that in the morning, as soon as the sun is up, thou shalt rise early, and set upon the city: and, behold, when he and the people that is with him come out against thee, then mayest thou do to them as thou shalt find occasion."

'You're seeing things!'

Judges 9:36-37 - "And when Gaal saw the people, he said to Zebul, Behold, there come people down from the top of the mountains. And Zebul said unto him, Thou seest the shadow of the mountains as if they were men. And Gaal spake again and said, See there come people down by the middle of the land, and another company come along by the plain of Meonenim."

"The plain of Meonim" - the "oak of the soothsayers" - actually the Oak of Moreh

Judges 9:38 - "Then said Zebul unto him, Where is now thy mouth, wherewith thou saidst, Who is Abimelech, that we should serve him? is not this the people that thou hast despised? go out, I pray now, and fight with them."

"the people that thou has despised" = Abimelech and his forces, which Gaal belittled and dismissed (**verse 28**)

After delaying Gaal as long as he could, Zebul now taunts him to attack. But Gaal is beaten back.

Judges 9:40-41 - "And Abimelech chased him, and he fled before him, and many were overthrown and wounded, even unto the entering of the gate. And Abimelech dwelt at Arumah: and Zebul thrust out Gaal and his brethren, that they should not dwell in Shechem."

Zebul was able to rally citizens - Ephraimites? - friendly to Abimelech and kick out Gaal, who was now diminished in influence and respect by his defeat.

But even so, Abimelech was still angry with the whole city.

Judges 9:42 - "And it came to pass on the morrow, that the people went out into the field; and they told Abimelech."

They came out to harvest the grape vintage according to Josephus.

Judges 9:43 - "And he took the people, and divided them into three companies, and laid wait in the field, and looked, and, behold, the people were come forth out of the city; and he rose up against them, and smote them. And Abimelech, and the company that was with him, rushed forward, and stood in the entering of the gate of the city: and the two other companies ran upon all the people that were in the fields, and slew them."

Abimelech divided his own people into three companies, laid wait and then massacred the Shechemites. He then reached the city gate and secured it, and finished the slaughter.

Judges 9:45 - "And Abimelech fought against the city all that day; and he took the city, and slew the people that was therein, and beat down the city, and sowed it with salt."

In the ancient Near East, it wasn't uncommon to strew the ground of a destroyed city with salt, lye, plants, or seeds in a ritualistic way, probably as a curse meant to prevent habitation. We have Biblical, Assyrian and Hittite sources mentioning this ritual. (The story that Rome salted the ruins of Carthage, though, is a later tradition not mentioned in the ancient sources).

Judges 9:46 - "And when all the men of the tower of Shechem heard that, they entered into an hold of the house of the god Berith. And it was told Abimelech, that all the men of the tower of Shechem were gathered together."

The remaining warriors in the tower of Millo decided to seek refuge in the temple of their god, Baal-Berith, along with the remaining survivors of Abimelech's slaughter.

Kindling for a Fire

As the object of Jotham's Parable of the Trees, Abimelech "the bramble" now uses trees to bring about the fulfillment of the prophecy, and sets them afire.

Judge 9:48 - "And Abimelech gat him up to mount Zalmon, he and all the people that were with him; and Abimelech took an axe in his hand, and cut down a bough from the trees, and took it, and laid it on his shoulder, and said unto the people that were with him, What ye have seen me do, make haste, and do as I have done."

"Zalmon" = *salmon* - shady, indicating it was heavily wooded

"What ye have seen me do, make haste, and do as I have done." - This is what Gideon told his men: "Watch me and do as I do" (**Judges 7:17**).

This would probably look like the scene in Macbeth, when he predicts he will reign until "the wood of Birnam rise." The woods indeed move to Dunsinane when branches are cut down and used as camouflage by the invading English forces. Perhaps Shakespeare got this image from the story of Abimelech. (See also the attack of the Ents against the Tower of Saruman in Lord of the Rings)

In this case, however, the wood was used to set fire to the stronghold of Baal-Berith, and 1,000 men and women died.

(Rashi says this was actually a "high place" or forest - perhaps a grove - dedicated to Baal, not a stronghold of a temple).

So much for the safety and refuge provided by Baal.

Abimelech's Downfall

Judges 9:50-51 - "Then went Abimelech to Thebez, and encamped against Thebez, and took it. But there was a strong tower within the city, and thither fled all the men and women, and all they of the city, and shut it to them, and gat them up to the top of the

tower."

Thebez or Thebes was a small town or suburb of Shechem, but it had a strong tower.

Judges 9:52 - "And Abimelech came unto the tower, and fought against it, and went hard unto the door of the tower to burn it with fire."

"went hard" - drew near

Judges 9:53-54 - "And a certain woman cast a piece of a millstone upon Abimelech's head, and all to brake his skull. Then he called hastily unto the young man his armourbearer, and said unto him, Draw thy sword, and slay me, that men say not of me, A woman slew him. And his young man thrust him through, and he died."

Abimelech had slain 70 of his brethren on one stone, now he also was brought down by means of a stone.

"A pice of a millstone" also reminds of the saying of Jesus: "But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea." (**Matthew 18:6**)

Despite Aimelech's desire to avoid humiliation, his story was recorded in the Book of Judges and remembered later. It is repeated at King David's lowest moral hour, receiving the report of Uriah's arranged death:

- **2 Samuel 11:18-21** - "Joab sent to David a full account of the battle and instructed the messenger, "When you have finished giving the king all the details of the battle, if the king's anger flares, he may ask you, 'Why did you get so close to the city to fight? Did you not realize they would shoot from atop the wall? Who was the one to strike Abimelech son of Jerubbesheth? Was it not a woman who dropped an upper millstone on him from the wall, so that he died in Thebez? Why did you get so close to the wall?' If so, then you are to say, 'Your servant Uriah the Hittite is dead as well.'"

So the inhabitants of Thebez escaped the vengeance of Abimelech.

Judges 9:55-57 - "And when the men of Israel saw that Abimelech was dead, they departed every man unto his place. Thus God rendered the wickedness of Abimelech, which he did unto his father, in slaying his seventy brethren: And all the evil of the men of Shechem did God render upon their heads: and upon them came the curse of Jotham the son of Jerubbaal."

This whole story is really meant was a warning to show the depths to which Israel had sunk.

In the next section, things get even worse.