

A DIGEST OF CHAPTER 9

- Vv. 1- 6 *Abimelech made king*. Gideon refused the office when the people of Israel came to him and offered to make him their king. At that time, he said God was to be their ruler. Gideon's son, Abimelech, born of a concubine of Gideon's, accepted the opportunity to usurp the role of leadership in Israel. He slew the seventy sons of Gideon so that no one could dispute his being Gideon's sole heir. It was an abortive attempt to establish a monarchy in Israel and was ill-fated.
- Vv. 7-21 *Jotham's fable*. Jotham told a story in the form of a fable which illustrated the folly of the people in making Abimelech their king.

STUDIES IN JOSHUA-JUDGES-RUTH

He pronounced judgment on them, and then ran away to hide to escape the fate of the other sons of Gideon. He was the sole survivor out of a total of seventy sons whom Abimelech had tried to exterminate. Jotham was Gideon's youngest son, and had been hid from the slaughter performed by Abimelech.

Vv. 22-41 *Gaal's plot against Abimelech.* The wicked men of Shechem who had accepted Abimelech's proud offer to be their king soon tired of his rule. They entered into a plot with Gaal, who had challenged them to overthrow the government of Abimelech.

Vv. 42-49 *The slaughter of the Shechemites.* The men who revolted against Abimelech in Shechem found refuge in the house of Baal-berith. Abimelech led in the cutting down of branches of trees, and all who were with him followed his leadership as they set fire to the tower where the Shechemites had hid. In this way, they destroyed the thousand men and women.

Vv. 50-57 *The death of Abimelech.* Abimelech fled to Thebez. At this citadel a woman cast a piece of a millstone off the top of the tower and struck Abimelech on the head. Mortally wounded, he called for his armourbearer to slay him so that it would not be recorded that a woman had killed him.

LESSONS FOR LEARNING

1. *Love is not puffed up.* Abimelech was not a man who loved his people. He loved himself. He was puffed up in his own conceit; and like the brier of the fable, he

considered himself to be worthy of ruling over his

fellows, Gideon, Abimelech's father, had demonstrated more love for his people as he had refused to take the exalted office of king over Israel,

- 2., *Uneasy is the head that wears the crown.* Any person in a place of leadership is constantly a target for the attacks of those whom he attempts to lead. A king is quickly toppled from his throne by a rebellious people. For that reason, it has been said again and again that the head is uneasy that wears the crown. This is especially true when the crown has been secured by foul means. For this reason, we are not surprised to read that the men and women of Shechem soon turned their backs on Abimelech and that the people of Thebez finally slew the short-lived king of Israel,
3. *Vengeance belongs to God.* The Apostle Paul urged the Christians in Rome not to avenge themselves. At that time, he stated a principle which was laid down in the Law where it is written, "Vengeance belongeth to me; I will recompense, saith the Lord" (Deuteronomy 32:35). Jotham did not try to organize a military force to oppress his wicked brother, Abimelech. He stated an eternal truth in the form of a fable and prayed that Abimelech and the Shechemites would come to destruction by the hand of God. This did occur, and the truth which Jotham had espoused was vindicated.

CHAPTER NINE

Abimelech Made King 9:1-6

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,

2 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.

3 And his mother's brethren spake of him in the ears of all the men of Shechem all these words: and their hearts inclined to follow Abimelech; for they said, He is our brother.

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.

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.

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.

1. *Who was Abimelech?* 9:1

Abimelech was the son of Gideon and the grandson of Joash. He was born to Gideon and a concubine of Gideon's who lived in Shechem. He was thus of the family of Manasseh and pressed his claim to a place of leadership on the basis of being a son of Gideon. Although his father had declined to fill the office of king over Israel, he coveted the office, first winning the support of the members of his mother's family, and then murdering all the sons of his father to protect his claim to the inheritance of Gideon.

2. *Why did he go to Shechem?* 9:1b

His mother was Gideon's concubine. She was also called a handmaid (9:18). A concubine was a woman

with whom the man cohabited lawfully. She apparently enjoyed no other connubial right but that of cohabitation until the time of the Law when her state was protected by laws and regulations (Exodus 21:7-9 and Deuteronomy 21:10-14). The old Jewish rabbis differ as to what constitutes concubinage; some regard its distinguishing feature as the absence of the betrothing ceremonies and of the dowry. In Roman times, concubinage was an allowed custom. It was sometimes referred to as a marriage of conscience. It was not God's intention from the beginning that man should have more than one wife; but some of the patriarchs, including Abraham and Jacob, had these handmaids, or concubines. Abimelech's mother was Gideon's concubine in Shechem.

3. *Why did the men of Shechem follow Abimelech?* 9:3

Abimelech had very cunningly approached his relatives in Shechem. They are called "his mother's brethren" (9:1). These men evidently had a mistaken idea of the nature of the judgeship in Israel; for Abimelech approached them by suggesting he should succeed his father, Gideon, in the place of leadership. There is nothing in any of the narrative of the book of Judges to indicate that the office of judge was hereditary. Nevertheless, fooled by Abimelech as they were, these men who were relatives of Abimelech persuaded the other men of Shechem to allow Abimelech to take the leadership over them.

4. *Why did they give him seventy pieces of silver?* 9:4

These dishonorable men of Shechem supported Abimelech's campaign by providing seventy pieces of silver out of the house of Baal-berith, their pagan god. With this money, Abimelech was able to hire vain and wicked men who would follow him. Since there were seventy sons of Gideon, we are left to suppose Abimelech was paid one piece of silver each for the sons of Gideon whom he killed.

5. Which son of Gideon escaped? 9:5

Jotham, the youngest of Gideon's sons, escaped by hiding from Abimelech's assassins. We learn that Jether was Gideon's oldest son (8:20), and Jotham and Jether are the only other sons named here except Abimelech himself. Gideon's sons were many, being seventy in number; and they would doubtless have been a blessing to the people of Israel if they had been allowed to live. Abimelech's purge was similar to the attempt of Athaliah to rid Judah of any heir to the throne in Jerusalem (II Kings 11:1) .

Jotham Rebukes the Shechemites 9:7-21

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.

8 The trees went forth on a time to anoint a king over them; and they said unto the olive tree, Reign thou over us.

9 But the olive tree said unto them, Should I leave my fatness, wherewith by me they honor God and man, and go to be promoted over the trees?

10 And the trees said to the fig tree, Come thou, and reign over us.

11 But the fig tree said unto them, Should I forsake my sweetness, and my good fruit, and go to be promoted over the trees?

12 Then said the trees unto the vine, Come thou, and reign over us.

13 And the vine said unto them, Should I leave my wine, which cheereth God and man, and go to be promoted over the trees?

14 Then said all the trees unto the bramble, Come thou, and reign over us.

15 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.

16 Now therefore, if ye have done truly and sincerely, in that ye have made Abimelech king, and if ye have dealt well with Jerubbaal and his house, and have done unto him according to the deserving of his hands;

17 (For my father fought for you, and adventured his life far, and delivered you out of the hand of Midian:

18 And ye are risen up against my father's house this day, and have slain his sons, threescore and ten persons, upon one stone, and have made Abimelech, the son of his maidservant, king over the men of Shechem, because he is your brother ;)

19 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:

20 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.

21 And Jotham ran away, and fled, and went to Beer, and dwelt there, for fear of Abimelech his brother.

6. *Where was Mount Gerizim? 9:7*

Mount Gerizim was the more southern of the two mountains between which Shechem was snuggled. The northern mountain was named Mount Ebal. Here the people of Israel under Joshua gathered for the reading of the Law and the hearing of the blessings and of the cursings (Joshua 8). Alexander the Great gave Sanballat the privilege of building a temple on Mount Gerizim. From the top of this mountain, the traveler receives one of the finest views in

Palestine. Snowcapped Mount Hermon is

on the northern horizon, the Mediterranean Sea is visible to the west, and the highlands of Gilead appear like a dark blue band below the horizon on the east.

7. *What was the point of Jotham's fable? 9:7-21*

The fable tells of the kingship of the trees, which, after being declined by all useful plants, was finally offered to the bramble. The latter, inflated by its unexpected dignity, pompously offers its "shade" to its faithful subjects, while threatening all traitors with punishment (brambles carry forest fires). This was the manner of an oriental monarch assuming the throne. Having thus parodied the relationship of the worthless Abimelech to the Shechemites, Jotham sarcastically wished both parties happiness in their bargain, which ended in destruction for all concerned.

8. *Where was Beer? 9:21*

The word, *beer*, means "well" in Hebrew and signifies a place where water is available. Such a place is mentioned in Numbers 21:16-18 as a spot east of the Jordan River. There is also a Beeroth mentioned in Joshua 9:17. If we are correct in identifying Beer with Beeroth, it would lie some eight miles north of Jerusalem, along the main road north. Usually the word *beer* is compounded with another word, as in Beersheba and Beerlahairoi (Genesis 21:31; Genesis 16:14).

The Conspiracy of Gaal 9:22-49

22 When Abimelech had reigned three years over Israel,

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

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,

2 5 And the men of Shechem set tiers 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.

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.

27 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.

28 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?

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.

3 0 And when Zebul the ruler of the city heard the words of Gaal the son of Ebed, his anger was kindled.

31 And he sent messengers unto Abimelech privily, saying, Behold, Gaal the son of Ebed and his brethren be come to Shechem; and, behold, they fortify the city against thee.

32 Now therefore up by night, thou and the people that is with thee, and lie in wait in the field:

3 3 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.

34 And Abimelech rose up, and all the people that were with him, by night, and they laid wait against Shechem in four companies.

35 And Gaal the son of Ebed went out, and stood in the entering of the gate of the city: and Abimelech rose up, and the people that were with him, from lying in wait.

36 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.

37 And Gaal spoke again and said, See there come people down by the middle of the land, and another company come along by the plain of Meonenim.

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.

39 And Gaal went out before the men of Shechem, and fought with Abimelech.

40 And Abimelech chased him, and he fled before him, and many were overthrown and wounded, even unto the entering of the gate.

41 And Abimelech dwelt at Arumah: and Zebul thrust out Gaal and his brethren, that they should not dwell in Shechem.

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

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.

44 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.

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.

46 And when all the men of the tower of Shechem heard that, they entered into a hold of the house of the god Berith.

47 And it was told Abimelech, that all the men of the tower of Shechem were gathered together,

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.

49 And all the people likewise cut down every man his bough, and followed Abimelech, and put them to the hold, and set the hold on fire upon them; so that all the men of the tower of Shechem died also, about a thousand men and women.

9, Why did God send an evil spirit? 9:23

God allowed Satan to try Job (Job 1) , and in the days of Abimelech He allowed an evil spirit to come between Abimelech and his wicked colleagues. God, Himself, is not the author of evil, He does not tempt any man to sin; and He, Himself, is not tempted with evil. Men are drawn away by their own lusts; and lust, when it conceives, brings forth sin. These evil-minded men were full of evil passions and lusts. These lusts erupted in a rebellion which brought death and destruction on all concerned. God allowed this evil spirit to come between Abimelech and those with whom he had been associated in order that He might avenge the wicked deeds done against the house of Gideon.

10. *Why did the men rob travelers?* 9:25

These Tiers-in-wait may have been trying to catch Abimelech himself. Abimelech was told about these culprits. More than likely, however, these highway robbers were set to discredit the government of Abimelech. The people would become uneasy when it was unsafe to travel. They would look for new leadership to rid their country of this threat. In this way, those who opposed Abimelech hoped to depose him.

11. *Who was Gaal?* 9:26

Gaal is described as a son of Ebed. The word *ebed* means servant. He may have been a man of common birth. He was evidently not of the descendants of Gideon in any way. Some manuscripts have a different Hebrew word which is transliterated as *eber*. *Eber* is known as the father of the Jews, the one giving them the name of Hebrews; but the greater weight of evidence is for the leaving of the word *ebed*. He appears to be a brigand who was ready to sell his services to the highest bidder.

12. *Who was Hamor?* 9:28

Hamor is known as the father of Shechem (Genesis 33:19). It was this man who arranged for the marriage of his son with Dinah, the daughter of Jacob. The point made by Gaal is that the family of Abimelech is an outside family. The real heritage of these people was rooted in Canaanitish origins. Gaal appears to have encouraged the old line family of Shechem to rise up against Abimelech, a late-comer, who was thrust upon the scene in Shechem by Gideon's cohabiting with his concubine who lived there.

13. *Who was Zebul?* 9:30

Zebul is described in various ways in this passage of the book of Judges. The name itself signifies one who is exalted. He is called the ruler of the city in this verse. This phrase in the Hebrew is translated as the governor of

the city in I Kings 22:26 and elsewhere. We might describe him as the *mukhtar*, the commandant of the town. He is also called the *pakidh*, "officer" or "deputy" of Abimelech. Zebul exercised rule for Abimelech in Shechem since Abimelech lived in Arumah (verse 41) Gaal's appeal was for the people of Shechem to throw off the yoke of Abimelech and his deputy. He urged them to elect someone of their own rank to be their leader. Undoubtedly, he was hoping they would make him the new captain.

14. Where was Meonenim? 9:37

In some versions this proper name is translated and indicates an oak of a diviner or soothsayer. Undoubtedly, it was a place which had received a name because of some wizard having lived there. It helped the people to identify the location of those who were attacking the city since a part of them came down the valley in the middle of the land. The rest of them came from a different direction. It was necessary for those who defended the city to make preparations to meet both parties.

15. Where was Arumah? 9:41

Arumah must have been a spot in the neighborhood of Shechem. Eusebius suggested that it was Rouma, which was named Remphis in his day; but this site is in the neighborhood of Lydda and quite far distant and rather inaccessible to Shechem. The root of the word is the same one which is elsewhere translated as height and would signify a city built on a high place which would be easy to defend. Since there are two great heights, Ebal and Gerizim, in the immediate vicinity of Shechem and others are not far distant, Abimelech may have chosen to reside on one of these, Arumah, while leaving the government of the community of Shechem in the hands of Zebul, his deputy.

16. What was Abimelech's strategy? 9:43, 44

Abimelech divided his forces into three companies. Some of them were to attack those who were in the city, and others were to cut off the men of Shechem who were in the field. They waited until the people in Shechem went out into the field. This reference implies that the people were going out to work in their crops and not to go to battle against Abimelech. Some of Abimelech's army would cut off those who were outside the city; still others would take their station by the city gate to stop the retreat of the Shechemites as they sought to return into their city. Thus, they were able to fall upon all who were in the field and slay them. When Abimelech had fought against the city all day, he took it; and when he had slain all the people in it, he destroyed the city. To show his indignation for the city, he spread salt throughout it. Such an act was symbolic and signified that the city was to be barren.

17. Who was the god Berith? 9:46

Berith was a god of the covenant. The people of Shechem had sold themselves to the service of this false god. When Abimelech took the city, the people fled to the temple of this god; probably not so much to defend themselves as to seek sanctuary there. They must have felt Abimelech would not attack a holy place, but Abimelech did not allow this to stop him. He cut down branches of trees and commanded his soldiers to do the same. When they had laid these against the stronghold of the temple area, they set fire to it. In this way, they destroyed about a thousand men and women of Shechem and made their victory complete.

18. Where was Mount Zalmon? 9:48

Mount Zalmon was the height where Abimelech and his followers gathered wood with which they burned down the stronghold of the house of Baal-berith. The mountain

was not far from the city, therefore, but there is no name of the place surviving today in the vicinity. Some commentators suggest that the modern Aramaic name of Mount Ebal, es-Sulemiyeh, may be a derivative of the ancient name of Zalmon. Mount Ebal is just north of the valley in which this settlement of Shechem lies, and it would be natural for Abimelech and his people to go to that height in order to lie in wait over the city. The name occurs again in Psalms 68:14.

Death of Abimelech 9:50-57

50 Then went Abimelech to Thebez, and encamped against Thebez, and took it.

51 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.

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.

53 And a certain woman cast a piece of a millstone upon Abimelech's head, and all to break his skull.

54 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,

5 5 And when the men of Israel saw that Abimelech was dead, they departed every man unto his place.

56 Thus God rendered the wickedness of Abimelech, which he did unto his father, in slaying his seventy brethren:

57 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.

19. Why did Abimelech go to Thebez? 9:50

Thebez was a place thirteen miles north and east of Shechem, now called Tubas. It was situated on a gentle hill, surrounded by large groves of olives and well cultivated fields. The city must have refused to submit to the rule of Abimelech; because after he had reduced Shechem to ruins, he turned his attention towards the people of this city. It was here that he found a strong tower into which all of the inhabitants had gathered for safety, climbing even to the roof of the tower. In the flush of victory, Abimelech threw caution away, and a woman cast a piece of upper millstone upon his head.

20. What was a millstone? 9:53

Generally, the upper millstone was a round stone. It is called *lapis vector* in Latin. Jesus said that it was better for a man to have a millstone to be tied around his neck and be cast into the sea rather than that he cause one of His followers to stumble (Luke 17:2). This was Jesus' way of saying that having a millstone around one's neck was certain destruction if he were cast into the sea. Millstones were very heavy. Even a piece of one was sufficient to crush the skull of the ignominious Abimelech.

21. What was the curse of Jotham? 9:57

When Jotham gave his fable before the people of Shechem, he said that if the people had been sincere and just in their dealings with Jerubbaal, then the house of Abimelech should stand as a beneficent monarchy. If, on the other hand, they had been unjust in allowing him to hire vain fellows and kill all of Gideon's descendants except himself, Jotham prayed that fire would come to devour the men of Shechem and Abimelech. Abimelech set fire to the city of Shechem and the stronghold at Thebez. In the process,

however, Abimelech, himself, met his death. Thus, the prayer of Jotham was answered. His prayer

was a prediction which he evidently made in the form of a curse, contingent upon the will of God.

TEN QUESTIONS ON CHAPTER 9

1. Where did Abimelech's mother live?
2. How many sons of Gideon did Abimelech slay?
3. What was the name of the one son who escaped?
4. What tree was first asked to rule over the trees in the fable?
5. What other tree was asked to be the ruler?
6. What kind of a plant was the third to be asked?
7. To what plant was Abimelech compared in the fable?
8. Who led the men of Shechem in their revolt against Abimelech?
9. What was the name of the god in whose house the men of Shechem hid?
10. How many men and women were killed when the tower of Shechem was burned?