

“COME, BE OUR KING”: THE PORTRAYAL OF ABIMELEK AS AN ANTI-JUDGE IN  
JUDGES 9

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## ABSTRACT

The Lord said to Samuel concerning the Israelites, “It is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king” (1 Sam 8:7). The book of Judges gives evidence of this rejection prior to the life of Samuel. One sees the rejection of the Israelites even in the reign of their God-given judges. Though these judges fulfilled their roles as deliverers, many displayed personal imperfections. Amidst the accounts of the judges of Israel is the account of Abimelek. The illegitimate son of Gideon receives no assignment or directive from the Lord, but rather seizes temporal authority of his own accord. While the language surrounding Abimelek is that of kingship, his short reign functions more similarly to that of a judge. The book of Judges portrays Abimelek as a sort of anti-judge, one who embodies and amplifies the worst characteristics of the judges. This paper examines the life of Abimelek and compares and contrasts his life with the lives of the other judges.

## INTRODUCTION

“I have found David son of Jesse, a man after my own heart; he will do everything I want him to do” (Acts 13:22).<sup>1</sup> The Apostle Paul spoke these words to Jews gathered in the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch. As Paul walked through the history of Israel, he reflected on the feelings of his God concerning David, the model king of Israel. What Samuel prophesied to Saul came to pass. “The LORD sought out a man after his own heart and appointed him ruler of his people” (1 Sam 13:14). David was the man anointed as king, and he ruled God’s people for forty years.

David had his many shortcomings, no doubt. But his personal failures did not discredit or overturn his anointing. David received punishment for his sins, punishment which at times extended to his subjects.<sup>2</sup> But God remained faithful to the covenant he made with his servant David.

But not all kings are made the same. The reason that David became king in the first place was due to the failures of the previously anointed ruler of Israel, Saul. Many rulers would come after David’s reign. Some would be faithful to the Lord. Many would not remain faithful to the Lord, and their subjects would suffer as a result.

If things can go wrong for God’s anointed leader, how much more trouble will there be for the man who elects himself to a position of authority over God’s people? That very situation

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1. Unless otherwise notes, all Scriptural references will be from NIV 2011.

2. For example, the Lord sent a plague against Israel on account of David’s sin in 2 Samuel 24.

took place in Judges 9. Abimelek, son of Gideon, claimed political authority for himself apart from a calling from the Lord. The results? Disastrous for both Abimelek and the people he led. Both Abimelek and the Shechemites would meet a gruesome end.

However, Abimelek's tale did not take place during the time of the monarchy, as one might expect. Instead, this sordid account occurred during the time of the judges—a time in which “Israel had no king” and “everyone did as they saw fit” (Judg 21:25). Instead of a centralized monarchy, it was the Lord who was the ruler of the Israelites at this time (Judg 8:23; 1 Sam 8:7). When troubles arose, he would send someone to take military action against the people's enemies, though this rule was regional in nature. These “judges” protected God's people, and peace existed during their lives.

Even though the judges were appointed and sent by the Lord, they were not perfect. One sees their personal shortcomings along with their godly actions. As the period of the judges progressed, the shortcomings became clearer and clearer.<sup>3</sup> The judges became increasingly plagued by immorality and impropriety.

What is one to make of Abimelek? Is he the first king of Israel whose rule lasts only a short while? Or is he a judge who has gone sorely awry? Through an extensive comparison between the life of Abimelek and the other judges in the book of Judges, this essay will show that Abimelek functions as an anti-judge.<sup>4</sup> He is portrayed as a judge in the worst of ways. He

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3. Michael Wilcock, *The Message of Judges: Grace Abounding*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 1992), 90.

4. K. Lawson Younger uses the term “antijudge” in a footnote in his general introduction of the characters in Judges. “The work of the cyclical/major judge, Gideon, is undone by the antijudge, ‘king’ Abimelech, Gideon's son” (39). The *Concordia Self-Study Bible New International Version* (1984) also uses the term “anti-judge” to describe Abimelek (327). So, too, does Kenneth Way. “Although he is the son of Gideon, Abimelek functions more like an ‘anti-judge’ who slaughters fellow Israelites.” K. Lawson Younger, Jr., *Judges, Ruth*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 39. Robert G. Hoerber, ed., *Concordia Self-Study Bible New*

embodies the negative qualities of the other judges and adds his own sadistic spin during his short reign in Shechem.<sup>5</sup>

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*International Version* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1984), 327. Kenneth C. Way, *Judges and Ruth*, Teach the Text Commentary Series (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016), 85.

5. Nadav Na'aman's article "A Hidden Anti-Samaritan Polemic in the Story of Abimelech and Shechem" makes an extensive comparison between Abimelek and his father Gideon. Na'aman portrays Abimelek as a "negative replica of Gideon," a sort of mirror image gone wrong (16). His approach assumes a later editor made emendations to the book of Judges to further highlight the comparisons and contrasts between the two men, i.e. many of the comparisons that this thesis will make were intentionally added "as part of the extremely negative presentation of the period that followed the death of Gideon, imitating the pragmatic framework of the stories in the Book of Judges according to which the death of the deliverer brought about the return to the former forbidden cults" (16). This thesis assumes that the events actually happened as portrayed in Judges and were not merely later additions for the sake of political influence. Nadav Na'aman, "A Hidden Anti-Samaritan Polemic in the Story of Abimelech and Shechem (Judges 9)," *Biblische Zeitschrift* (2011): 16.

## PART 1: A HISTORY OF LEGITIMATE RULERS IN ISRAEL BEFORE THE PERIOD OF THE JUDGES

Rightful rulers of Israel obtained their position directly from God, through the anointing or proclamation of his prophets, or, during the reign of the kings, through monarchical succession.<sup>6</sup> While he was not a political ruler in the technical sense, the patriarch Abraham exerted a major influence on the nation that would become Israel.<sup>7</sup> He was called to that position directly by God (Gen 12:1–4; 13:14–17; 15:1–21; 17:1–22; 22:15–18). Abraham’s offspring, the patriarchs Isaac and Jacob, also received direct calls from the Lord (Gen 26:2–5, 24; 28:12–15; 35:9–13). But the family descended from Abraham was small at the time. Exodus 1 states, “The descendants of Jacob numbered seventy in all” (Exod 1:5). A family of seventy seems far from a kingdom.

Structured political authority and influence for the Israelites took a new shape under Moses. By that time, the family of seventy had ballooned into a nation that had 603,550 “Israelites twenty years old or more who were able to serve in Israel’s army” (Num 1:45–46). God directly appointed Moses from a burning bush to lead his people out of Egypt (Exod 3–4). Moses continued to lead the people of Israel until his death. He would judge their disputes, hand down instructions from the Lord, lead them from place to place, intercede with God on their

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6. In 1 Samuel 10:1, Samuel anointed Saul as the first king of Israel. At Saul’s coronation, Samuel “explained to the people the rights and duties of kingship” (1 Sam 10:25). He previously expounded on the implications of a king in 1 Samuel 8:10–22.

7. Even during the time of Jesus, Abraham was held in high regard. He is referenced throughout the New Testament as an important figure in terms of both national and religious identity. For example, see John 8:31–59.

behalf, and would do a plethora of other activities that denoted him as their temporal leader (e.g. Exod 8:13–26; 19:20–25; 20:1–21; 32:30–34; 33:7–11; Num 10:11–13). One also notes that the people were able to, and did, rebel against him (e.g. Num 11–17). The Israelites understood that God had placed him in a leadership position, and sometimes he did not lead as they wanted him to lead. After him, Joshua became the figurehead of this blossoming nation. God spoke with Joshua directly, assuring him that he had nothing to fear as he led the Israelites into their promised land (Josh 1:2–9). He led them on military campaigns against the nations that were occupying the Promised Land (Josh 2–24). But once Joshua died, no new figurehead replaced him. Instead, the Lord was to be the king of Israel. God himself testified to this theocracy in 1 Samuel. He said, “It is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king” (1 Sam 8:7). And the Israelites had agreed to this structure of governance and publicly committed to obeying the commands of the Lord at the time of Joshua’s death (Josh 24:21–27). God was their leader before, working through his servants Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and Joshua. But now he would govern the entire land of Israel without a human mouthpiece.



## PART 2: THE LEGITIMACY OF THE RULERS IN ISRAEL DURING THE TIME OF THE JUDGES

Trouble for the Israelites began brewing immediately following the death of Joshua. After the death of Joshua was recounted in Judges 2:8–9, the next verses state, “After that whole generation had been gathered to their ancestors, another generation grew up who knew neither the LORD nor what he had done for Israel. Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD and served the Baals” (Judg 2:10–11). The worship of Baal would be a continuous and ongoing temptation for the children of Israel throughout the book of Judges.<sup>8</sup> The spiritual apostasy of the Israelites had a negative impact on their physical well-being as they were often harassed by the nations that surrounded them.<sup>9</sup> During these times of trouble, they needed the Lord to come to their rescue. Judges 2 provides a succinct summary of the entire period of the judges:

Whenever the LORD raised up a judge for them, he was with the judge and saved them out of the hands of their enemies as long as the judge lived; for the LORD relented because of their groaning under those who oppressed and afflicted them. But when the judge died, the people returned to ways even more corrupt than those of their ancestors, following other gods and serving and worshiping them. They refused to give up their evil practices and stubborn ways (Judg 2:18–19).

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241. 8. Andrew Hill and John Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 238–

9. Gleason L. Archer, *A Survey of the Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody, 2007), 252.

One sees the cycle of rebellion, destruction, and salvation expressed in this passage and found throughout the book. Younger notes eight components of the judge cycle for the “major/cyclical”<sup>10</sup> judges:

1. Israel does evil in the eyes of Yahweh.
2. Yahweh gives/sells them into the hands of oppressors.
3. Israel serves the oppressor for  $x$  years.
4. Israel cries out to Yahweh.
5. Yahweh raises up a deliverer (i.e., judge)
6. The Spirit of Yahweh is upon the deliverer.
7. The oppressor is subdued (reversal of component 2).
8. The land has ‘rest’ for  $x$  years.<sup>11</sup>

God’s people would forsake him and pursue other gods. Then God would send an enemy to harm portions of the nation of Israel. The people would cry out from their state of oppression, so God would provide them with various “judges” who would deliver them from their enemies.

Numerous definitions exist for the Hebrew participle from the root  $\text{טפש}$ , most often translated as “judge.” Hill and Walton classify judges as “charismatic leaders” because “they spontaneously took leadership roles when the need arose.”<sup>12</sup> Dillard and Longman note that the

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10. The terms “major” and “minor” judges are used by a variety of scholars to describe two groups of judges. The “major” judges are mentioned in longer narrative accounts. The “major” judges are Othniel, Ehud, Barak/Deborah, Gideon, [Abimelek,] Jephthah, and Samson. The “minor” judges are sparsely mentioned and include virtually no details. The “minor” category judges are Tola, Jair, Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon. They are mentioned periodically throughout the book.

Daniel Block and K. Lawson Younger find the categories of “major” and “minor” problematic for the purpose of interpreting the book of Judges. Block writes that “the lengths of some of [the minor judges] rules suggest that historically several of these figures were major... [The author of Judges] failed to narrate their exploits because they do not contribute materially to his central thesis.” Instead, Block refers to the “primary” and “secondary” judges. Younger prefers the terminology “cyclical” and “non-cyclical” judges since he believes that the narrative purpose of the book of Judges is advanced through the longer accounts of the “major” judges. Failure to view each “major” judge within the context of the book “misunderstand[s] the cycle’s section and produce[s]...misreadings.” Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 55. Younger, *Judges*, 39.

This paper will primarily use the terms “major” and “minor” to distinguish between the two groups.

11. Younger, *Judges*, 35.

12. Hill and Walton, *A Survey*, 242.

judges “were not primarily judicial officials; rather, they were military leaders and clan chieftains who appeared periodically in different areas among the tribes to effect deliverance from enemies threatening parts of Israel.”<sup>13</sup> Wood points out the nuanced meaning of שפּט in Judges. “The concept [of שפּט] is ‘service as leader.’ ... It is centered in the disposal of administrative duties necessary to leadership.”<sup>14</sup> It is difficult to provide a concrete description of all the duties and responsibilities of a judge. Regardless of the specific duties of this position of temporal authority, the appointing of a judge resulted in deliverance and peace for the people of Israel.

One notes in Judges 2:18 that it was the Lord who raised up leaders to rescue his people. He appointed those whom he desired to be judges, the judges did not decide themselves to take on this task. The appointing of the judges, however, did not occur in the same manner as the appointing and anointing of the kings or prophets.<sup>15</sup> Various terms were used to describe God’s selection of the judges; there was no specifically repeated refrain.

Even though no official commissioning ceremony was mentioned for most of the judges, it was still the Lord who made the selection. No specific ordination was recorded, yet God still “raised up” Othniel and caused his Spirit to come upon him in order to deliver the Israelites from Cushan-Rishathaim king of Aram (Judg 3:9–10). Block notes the significance of the expression “the Spirit of the LORD” (רוּחַ־יְהוָה):

In the Book of Judges when the רוּחַ־יְהוָה, “Spirit of the LORD,” comes upon individuals, it signals the arresting presence and power of God, often of individuals who are unqualified for or indisposed to service for him. In the present instance the empowering

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13. Raymond B. Dillard and Tremper Longman III, *An Introduction of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 119.

14. Leon J. Wood, *Distressing Days of the Judges* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 4.

15. Hill and Walton, *A Survey*, 242.

presence of the Spirit of God transforms this minor Israelite officer from Debir into the ruler of Israel and the conqueror of a world-class enemy.<sup>16</sup>

The account of the next judge, Ehud, also omitted a direct call from God to serve as a judge. But Judges 3 makes it clear that it was the Lord who selected Ehud to be his judge. “[The LORD] gave [the Israelites] a deliverer—Ehud...son of Gera the Benjamite” (Judg 3:15). God’s prophet Deborah commissioned Barak to fight against Sisera, the commander of the Canaanite army. Deborah told Barak, “The LORD, the God of Israel, commands you: ‘Go, take with you ten thousand men of Naphtali and Zebulun and lead them up to Mount Tabor. I will lead Sisera, the commander of Jabin’s army, with his chariots and his troops to the Kishon River and give him into your hands’” (Judg 4:6–7). The end of the account also made it clear that God was truly the one delivering his people utilizing Deborah and Barak. “On that day *God* subdued Jabin king of Canaan before the Israelites” (Judg 4:23).

The appointment of Gideon to judgeship was one of the most extensive in the entire book of Judges. Uniquely, it was the angel of the Lord who appeared to Gideon to announce his judgeship. Based on Gideon’s fear of death from being in the angel of the Lord’s presence (Judg 6:22–23) and other Old Testament accounts such as the calling of Moses in Exodus 3–4, Vogel concludes, “This appearance of the Angel of the Lord to Gideon was doubtless another in a series of appearances of the pre-incarnate Christ to Old Testament believers.”<sup>17</sup> The Lord not only placed Gideon in this position directly, but he explained in detail the plan for deliverance from the Midianites.<sup>18</sup>

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16. Block, *Judges*, 155.

17. Heinrich Vogel, “The Angel of the Lord,” Mequon: WLS Essay File (n.d.), 6.

18. This extended calling may be the reason that the *Concordia Self-Study Bible* states, “In many ways Gideon is the ideal judge, evoking memory of Moses...” It is this author’s opinion that any leader who establishes

No specific calling was detailed for the next major judge, Jephthah. His words, however, do seem to indicate his knowledge of a higher calling. In response to the king of the Ammonites, Jephthah placed the Lord as the subject of some of Israel's previous deliveries (Judg 11:14–27). One also sees that “the Spirit of the LORD came upon Jephthah,” as was also recorded concerning Othniel (Judg 3:10; 11:29).

The next major judge after Jephthah was Samson. Even before he was conceived, the angel of the Lord told Samson's parents that he would “take the lead in delivering Israel from the hands of the Philistines” (Judg 13:5). As Samson grew, “the LORD blessed him, and the Spirit of the LORD began to stir him while he was in Mahaneh Dan, between Zorah and Eshtaol” (Judg 13:24–25). “The Spirit of the LORD” continued to come upon Samson throughout his life (Judg 14:6, 19; 15:14). Even though Samson displayed morality that did not align with the Law of the Lord and forsook his Nazarite vow which led to his capture by the Philistines, God still answered his prayer at the end of his life:

Then Samson prayed to the LORD, ‘Sovereign LORD, remember me. Please, God, strengthen me just once more, and let me with one blow get revenge on the Philistines for my two eyes.’ Then Samson reached toward the two central pillars on which the temple stood. Bracing himself against them, his right hand on the one and his left hand on the other, Samson said, ‘Let me die with the Philistines!’ Then he pushed with all his might, and down came the temple on the rulers and all the people in it. Thus he killed many more when he died than while he lived (Judg 17:28-30).

There are several minor judges who have recounted directives from the Lord to lead Israel. The accounts of these judges are extremely short, spanning only a few verses. The brevity and lack of typical descriptors have led some, such as Block, to question whether or not the

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idolatry cannot be the ideal leader. Regardless, the appearance of the angel of the Lord to Gideon is a new occurrence in the book of Judges up to this point. Hoerber, ed., *Concordia*, 326.

minor judges were truly judges at all.<sup>19</sup> However, these judgeships were bookended by judges who did receive a specific appointment from the Lord. Additionally, the first of the minor judges, Shamgar, was mentioned in the Song of Deborah in Judges 5:6. Butler notes, “Still, Shamgar with his presence in this section of Judges and his indirect praise in the Song of Deborah stands with Othniel and Ehud as examples of how to pass the test God set down for the people of Israel as they faced the nations.”<sup>20</sup> Given the context of the book of Judges, it seems natural to assume that the not-specifically-called minor judges were also raised up by the Lord. They also delivered Israel and were successful in their quests just as the major judges. God’s summative statement in Judges 2 applies to them as well. “Then the LORD raised up judges, who saved them out of the hands of these raiders” (Judg 2:16).

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19. Block, *Judges*, 172–175.

20. Trent C. Butler, *Judge*, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2009), 74.

### PART 3: THE ABIMELEK NARRATIVE AND HIS PORTRAYAL AS AN ANTI-JUDGE

Amid the accounts of the judges came the story of Gideon's son, Abimelek. Abimelek was not one of the seventy legitimate sons of Gideon, but rather he was the son of one of his father's concubines in Shechem (Judg 8:31). Gideon gave his son the name Abimelek, which means "My father is king."<sup>21</sup> While the meaning of the name itself is clear in Hebrew, it is difficult to determine if Gideon meant to say that *he* was the king or if *God* was the king. Block notes, "The self-service we have witnessed in Gideon's behavior makes it difficult to resist the conclusion that the name Abimelek reflects the human father's perception of his own status in Israel."<sup>22</sup> Assis notes with similar bluntness, "The fact that he calls his son 'Abimelek' shows that Gideon sees him as the son of a king, and one way or the other he sees himself as king. The irony is clear."<sup>23</sup>

In Abimelek, one sees a man who wanted to live up to his name. Yet God never chose to call Abimelek to a position of temporal authority as he had called Gideon and the other judges. Judges 9 is the sordid account of Abimelek's attempt to be a ruler without the approval of the Lord. He essentially made himself a judge and acted as other judges had acted. But since he

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21. Robert Chisholm, Jr., *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2013), 294.

22. Block, *Judges*, 304.

23. Elie Assis, *Self-Interest or Communal Interest: An Ideology of Leadership in the Gideon, Abimelech and Jephthah Narratives (Judg 6–12)* (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2005), 113.

behaved contrary to the will of God, his many plans amounted to nothing more than short-term temporal authority followed by a brutal end to his life.

This thesis will examine Judges 9 section by section to compare the actions of Abimelek to the actions of the other judges. The anti-judge Abimelek duplicated the wicked facets of the other judges and took the wickedness of the judges to the extreme.

### **Judges 9:1–6: Abimelek’s Ascension to Power**

<sup>1</sup> Abimelek son of Jerub-Baal went to his mother’s brothers in Shechem and said to them and to all his mother’s clan, <sup>2</sup> “Ask all the citizens of Shechem, ‘Which is better for you: to have all seventy of Jerub-Baal’s sons rule over you, or just one man?’ Remember, I am your flesh and blood.”

<sup>3</sup> When the brothers repeated all this to the citizens of Shechem, they were inclined to follow Abimelek, for they said, “He is related to us.” <sup>4</sup> They gave him seventy shekels of silver from the temple of Baal-Berith, and Abimelek used it to hire reckless scoundrels, who became his followers. <sup>5</sup> He went to his father’s home in Ophrah and on one stone murdered his seventy brothers, the sons of Jerub-Baal. But Jotham, the youngest son of Jerub-Baal, escaped by hiding. <sup>6</sup> Then all the citizens of Shechem and Beth Millo gathered beside the great tree at the pillar in Shechem to crown Abimelek king (NIV 2011).

One sees in Abimelek the desire for temporal power apart from God’s will. Granted, not every judge in the book acts with God at the forefront of their minds. This is particularly true of the judges in the latter half of the book. For instance, Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson seem fueled at times by a personal desire for vengeance during moments of their judgeship, sometimes even against their own people.<sup>24</sup> Gideon threatened revenge on the Israelites living in Sukkoth and Peniel when they refused to provide food for his army (Judg 8:4–9). In his mind, they ought to

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24. Younger, *Judges*, 38–39.



give their judge what he needed in times of trouble.<sup>25</sup> Butler notes that Gideon was no longer acting on the Lord's behalf, but his own. "No longer is Gideon fighting for a nation or a coalition of tribes. He is now on a personal crusade of vengeance. The narrator now proceeds without mentioning God."<sup>26</sup> The judge Jephthah got revenge on the Ephraimites after they refused his call to aid in the fight against the Ammonites. When the Ephraimites threatened violence against Jephthah and his men, Jephthah enacted revenge by defeating them in battle and killing many who attempted to flee back to their tribal land (Judg 12:1–6). Jephthah did make mention of the Lord in his discourse before the fight, though "Yahweh was brought in only to enhance Jephthah's own case."<sup>27</sup> On multiple occasions, Samson responded with violence when he perceived an attack not against Israel, but against his own person. He murdered thirty Philistines when they solved his seemingly-unsolvable riddle, and he burned their fields when his wife was given to another man (Judg 14:19–20; 15:1–5). Concerning Samson's violent actions in Judges 14:19,20, Younger states, "The motive is not to deliver Israel from the Philistines or even to bring judgment on them. It only serves his purposes."<sup>28</sup>

While the personal agendas of some of the judges may have harmed their own lives and the lives of those around them,<sup>29</sup> they were still appointed by the Lord. They recognized, at least to some extent, God's purpose for their lives. Or, at the bare minimum, God was still working

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25. Barry G. Webb, *The Book of Judges*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 254.

26. Butler, *Judges*, 218.

27. Block, *Judges*, 383.

28. Younger, *Judges*, 304.

29. The folly and failed spiritual leadership of Gideon seems to play a large role in Abimelek's outlook on life, which is particularly germane for this thesis. "All of the slaughters and destructions that are described in chapter 9 are the result of Gideon's sins in 8:27–32." Younger, *Judges*, 233.

through them to deliver his people. God raised them up to provide deliverance from enemy forces, not to become dynastical rulers. For instance, Gideon could have forsaken the Lord and accepted the offer of kingship extended to him in Judges 8:22, but he does not. Instead, he tells the people of Israel, “I will not rule over you, nor will my son rule over you. The LORD will rule over you” (Judg 8:23).<sup>30</sup>

Perhaps Abimelek took exception to his father’s refusal to become king. Gideon not only turned down the kingship for himself, but he also refused the kingship for his sons. The young man whose name meant “my father is king” had his hope for temporal authority snuffed out by his own father who himself had acted quite kingly. “He is inspired by his father in the desire to be king, but at the same time he rejects, hates, and despises his father.”<sup>31</sup>

Abimelek also received no special calling from the Lord as his father and the other judges received. Not only does the account of Abimelek contain no mention of God establishing Abimelek’s rule, but it does not even contain a mention of God’s approval.<sup>32</sup> In fact, nowhere in the entire account of Abimelek was the name of the Lord mentioned. Abimelek needed to take matters into his own hands if he wanted a position of secular power.

Abimelek crafted a plan apart from the will of God to secure power over the men of Shechem. His political ascension would be unlike his predecessors’ who received their right to rule from the Lord.

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30. In his unpublished commentary on Judges, Braun notes that Gideon may have formally rejected the kingship for him and his sons, but his family still exercised some of the authority of a king. “Just as Gideon exercised monarchic power, even though he had outwardly rejected the kingship, so this son exercised de facto power in a subject city-state and provoked unrest.” Braun, Mark. *Judges* (unpublished manuscript, September 8, 2022). Concordia Commentary. PDF file.

31. Younger, *Judges*, 220.

32. Wilcock, *Judges*, 89.

The general idea of utilizing a preconceived strategy was not exclusive to Abimelek and Judges 9. God himself gave tactics to some of the judges. For example, God laid before Gideon a plan that seemed absurd. Only three hundred men would fight in the army. Trumpets, jars, and torches would be their weapons (Judg 7). They would need to rely on the strength of God, not their own might. That type of plan defied human logic. It was so outlandish that God allowed Gideon to enter the Midianite camp to give him confidence in God's plan. One man dreamed of a round loaf of barley that collapsed the tent in the Midianite camp. His friend replied, "This can be nothing other than the sword of Gideon son of Joash, the Israelite. God has given the Midianites and the whole camp into his hands" (Judg 7:14). Instead of utilizing his own plan or human logic, Gideon trusted in the Lord's plan and was victorious over his enemies.

There were not bountiful details regarding the deliverances of many of the other judges. But the people of God were being oppressed for a reason. The nation that was abusing them was outwardly stronger and mightier. This motif was explored frequently during the reign of the kings.<sup>33</sup> Instead of trusting in human wisdom, trust was placed in the Lord. The people called out to God, and he rescued them from their enemies.

Instead of trusting in the Lord, Abimelek trusted in his wisdom to acquire rule over the Shechemites. He began his grab for power by turning from his father's family and instead sought support from his mother and her relatives. He appealed to the connection of blood instead of a divine right or a moral code of ethics. His persuasion resulted in receiving seventy silver coins from the Shechemites which he used to hire "אֲנָשִׁים רִיקִים וּפְחָזִים," which the NIV 2011 renders

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33. The most vivid example that comes to this author's mind is the Lord's deliverance of Hezekiah and the citizens of Jerusalem when they were surrounded by an army of one hundred and eighty-five thousand Assyrians. Outnumbered, out armed, and without hope, the Israelites trusted in God for deliverance which he gave in the form of the angel of the Lord wiping out the Assyrian army (2 Kings 18–19).

“reckless scoundrels” (Judg 9:4). Jephthah similarly surrounded himself with “אַנְשֵׁים רִיקִים,” though the participle of the verb רָפַח was not used. Oeste reflects on the significance of the two descriptors of Abimelek’s comrades: “The narrator clearly wishes the audience to perceive these men negatively, as seen by his use of two similar epithets, ‘unprincipled’ and ‘reckless,’ to characterize them, thereby intensifying the evaluation.”<sup>34</sup>

The scheming of Abimelek came to a head as he systematically eliminated his seventy brothers on a single rock. Block describes the murder of the seventy sons of Gideon as “a calculated, brutal act of murder, not a quick slaughter of unsuspecting victims.”<sup>35</sup> Butler muses that “sacrificial undertones may sound here, showing how far Abimelek has strayed from Yahwistic faith and practice.”<sup>36</sup> Regardless of the nuance of the action, Abimelek destroyed the family line of Gideon for the price of a single silver coin per life. The significance of obtaining the throne by force apart from a calling of God cannot be overstated. “The killing effectively removes from Israel any legitimate leadership derived from family or dynastic ties and leaves the central figure of Israelite leadership as a half-breed with closer ties to the Canaanite Baal worshipers than to Israel.”<sup>37</sup>

The fact that Abimelek used violence is not intrinsically unique to his rule. Displays of violence were not uncommon throughout the reigns of the judges. In fact, the deliverances the judges provided involved putting their oppressors to death.<sup>38</sup> Ehud and the Israelites “struck

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34. Gordon K. Oeste, *Legitimacy, Illegitimacy, and the Right to Rule: Windows on Abimelech’s Rise and Demise in Judges 9* (New York: T & T Clark International, 2011), 128.

35. Block, *Judges*, 312.

36. Butler, *Judges*, 237.

37. Butler, *Judges*, 237.

38. Webb, *Judges*, 59–61.

down about ten thousand Moabites” to free the people from the thumb of Eglon (Judg 3:29). Barak and Deborah routed the men of Sisera. Sisera himself was memorably and graphically slain by Jael with a tent peg (Judg 4:21), an act that received praise in Deborah’s poetic recounting of this deliverance of Israel (Judg 5:24–27).

Some of the later judges seemed to have a particular affinity for violence. Gideon delivered the Israelites from the hands of Midian, but the violence did not stop there. He desired revenge on Zebah and Zalmunna for the death of his brothers (Judg 8:18–19). When his son Jether refused to kill the two men, Gideon avenged his brothers with his own hands (Judg 8:21). The judge Samson also displayed a disposition toward violence, and frequently utilized force to solve his problems (Judg 14:19–20; 15:1–5).

Abimelek took the propensity of the judges toward violence to the extreme. He used force to obtain and exert his authority. But the object of his wrath is unique in the book. He did not fight just against outside forces; he fought and murdered fellow Israelites who had not come to him with threats of violence, only rebellion against an illegitimate king. There are a few examples of other judges using force against fellow Israelites, though the circumstances were different. Abimelek’s father, Gideon, threatened the men of Sukkoth and Peniel when they did not provide refreshments for him and his men. McKenzie describes the incident in less than glowing terms. “Gideon treated the men of [Sukkoth and Peniel] as if they were no longer Israelites.”<sup>39</sup> Gideon’s threat, however, was in response to the men of Sukkoth and Peniel failing to aid their God-given judge. His violence against fellow Israelites was provoked. Jephthah also used violence against his fellow Israelites as noted above in Judges 12. He, too, was provoked to

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39. John McKenzie, *The World of the Judges*, Backgrounds to the Bible Series (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1966), 135.

use force as the Ephraimites approached him with a threat of violence. “Why did you go to fight the Ammonites without calling us to go with you? We’re going to burn down your house over your head” (Judg 12:1). There is, however, no record of the seventy sons of Gideon provoking Abimelek to take the lives of his fellow Israelites. Dillard and Longman summarize the dramatic shift in ideals from Gideon to Abimelek. “In spite of the good that Gideon did for Israel, his son becomes not a deliverer but an oppressor, not a servant to the nation but a murderer of Israelites and of his own family.”<sup>40</sup> God called the judges to protect, rescue, and defend his people.

Abimelek called himself to authority by means of a fratricidal scheme, destroying and desecrating his own people. Since he had no place in his heart for the will of God, he had no choice but to rely on his cunning and intelligence. He placed no trust in a God who turns human foolishness into fantastic acts of deliverance. Instead, the self-appointed charismatic leader trusted in his abilities and schemes.

The section ends with the Shechemites crowning Abimelek as king. The book of Judges was careful to avoid monarchical language in association with the judges. The called leaders up to this point have been referred to with the active participle from the verb טפּשׁ. But in Judges 9:6 the Shechemites “וַיִּמְלִיכוּ אֶת־אֲבִימֶלֶךְ לְמֶלֶךְ,” or as rendered by the NIV 2011, “All the citizens of Shechem and Beth Millo gathered ... to crown Abimelek king” (Judg 9:6).<sup>41</sup> The noun מֶלֶךְ,

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40. Dillard and Longman III, *An Intro*, 126.

41. J. Lyle Story, “Jotham’s Fable: A People and Leadership Called to Serve (Judges 8:22–9:57),” *Journal of Biblical Perspectives in Leadership* 2, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 34.

“king,”<sup>42</sup> is used thirty-seven times in Judges.<sup>43</sup> Twenty-nine of those uses are about foreign nations. Four of those uses occur in Judges 17–21 in the phrase **בַּיָּמִים הָהֵם אֵין מֶלֶךְ בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל**, “In those days Israel had no king” (Judg 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). The final three occurrences are in reference to Abimelek directly or in the parable that Jotham speaks in reference to him (Judg 9:6, 8, 15). The book of Judges also uses the verb from the same root, **מָלַךְ**, “be, or become king, reign,”<sup>44</sup> eight times.<sup>45</sup> In one occurrence, Jabin, king of Canaan is the subject (Judg 4:2). The other seven instances are about Abimelek and his ruling activity (Judg 9:6, 8, 10, 12, 14, 16, 18). The book of Judges also uses the verb from the root, **מָשַׁל**, “rule, have dominion, reign,”<sup>46</sup> eight times.<sup>47</sup> Two occurrences are about the Philistine rulers. Four of the uses are in the conversation between Gideon and the Israelites when they attempt to make him their king, a request which he denied. The final two occurrences of the verb **מָשַׁל** are found in Judges 9:2. Abimelek tried to persuade the Shechemites to allow him to “rule over” them, an invitation which they accepted. The monarchical Hebrew root **מָשַׁל** is used in Judges, though it is not applied to the judges until Abimelek took it upon himself.

Abimelek is portrayed in terms of kingly language. However, this was a time when “Israel had no king” (Judg 17:1; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). Abimelek may have viewed himself as a

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42. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, Charles A. Briggs, Wilhelm Gesenius and James Strong, *The Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon: With an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 2000), 572.

43. George V. Wigram, *The Englishman's Hebrew and Chaldee Concordance of the Old Testament: Being an Attempt at a Verbal Connection Between the Original and the English Translation*, vol. 1 (London: Samuel Bagster and Sons, 1890), 713–14.

44. Brown et al., *BDB*, 573.

45. Wigram, *The Englishman's Hebrew*, 710–12.

46. Brown et al., *BDB*, 605.

47. Wigram, *The Englishman's Hebrew*, 771.

king, but God had not appointed anyone to be the king of the land. Instead, his political authority would be local in nature like the other judges and would come to an explosive end.

### **Judges 9:7–21: A Prophetic Parable Against Abimelek and the Shechemites**

<sup>7</sup> When Jotham was told about this, he climbed up on the top of Mount Gerizim and shouted to them, “Listen to me, citizens of Shechem, so that God may listen to you. <sup>8</sup> One day the trees went out to anoint a king for themselves. They said to the olive tree, ‘Be our king.’”

<sup>9</sup> “But the olive tree answered, ‘Should I give up my oil, by which both gods and humans are honored, to hold sway over the trees?’”

<sup>10</sup> “Next, the trees said to the fig tree, ‘Come and be our king.’”

<sup>11</sup> “But the fig tree replied, ‘Should I give up my fruit, so good and sweet, to hold sway over the trees?’”

<sup>12</sup> “Then the trees said to the vine, ‘Come and be our king.’”

<sup>13</sup> “But the vine answered, ‘Should I give up my wine, which cheers both gods and humans, to hold sway over the trees?’”

<sup>14</sup> “Finally all the trees said to the thornbush, ‘Come and be our king.’”

<sup>15</sup> “The thornbush said to the trees, ‘If you really want to anoint me king over you, come and take refuge in my shade; but if not, then let fire come out of the thornbush and consume the cedars of Lebanon!’”

<sup>16</sup> “Have you acted honorably and in good faith by making Abimelek king? Have you been fair to Jerub-Baal and his family? Have you treated him as he deserves? <sup>17</sup> Remember that my father fought for you and risked his life to rescue you from the hand of Midian. <sup>18</sup> But today you have revolted against my father’s family. You have murdered his seventy sons on a single stone and have made Abimelek, the son of his female slave, king over the citizens of Shechem because he is related to you. <sup>19</sup> So have you acted honorably and in good faith toward Jerub-Baal and his family today? If you have, may Abimelek be your joy, and may you be his, too! <sup>20</sup> But if you have not, let fire come out from Abimelek and consume you, the citizens of Shechem and Beth Millo, and let fire come out from you, the citizens of Shechem and Beth Millo, and consume Abimelek!”



<sup>21</sup> Then Jotham fled, escaping to Beer, and he lived there because he was afraid of his brother Abimelek (NIV 2011).

Amid the prose account of Abimelek comes a poetic, prophetic fable uttered in response to the horror perpetrated by the new “king.” It came on the heels of Abimelek’s fratricidal rampage which Jotham somehow managed to escape. Although the fable spoken by Jotham was in response to the actions of Abimelek, he addressed the men of Shechem with his botanist-centric fable. Norden explains the characters in the narrative of Judges that correspond to the elements of Jotham’s monarchical fable:

The trees which sought a ruler over them represent the men of Shechem and others in Israel who were not satisfied with the judge system.... Gideon, the great liberator and judge, had refused to be king, and so, very likely, had also his eligible, legitimate sons. They are typified by the reluctant olive tree, fig tree, and vine.... The kingmakers then turned to the unscrupulous and murderous Abimelech, who corresponds to the bramble.<sup>48</sup>

Jotham’s fable took the form of a conditional curse against the men of Shechem. If they had acted properly, then nothing bad would befall them. If they respected the sacrifices made by Gideon, no curse would be enacted against them (Judg 9:17). But if they had not acted “honorably and in good faith toward Jerub-Baal and his family,” then “let fire come out from Abimelek and consume you, the citizens of Shechem and Beth Millo, and let fire come out from you, the citizens of Shechem and Beth Millo, and consume Abimelek!” (Judg 9:19–20). The rebellion of the Shechemites against the family of their former judge was instigated by one of his illegitimate sons.

Other judges rebelled against the Lord and received punishment for their disobedience. In his unpublished commentary on Judges, Braun points out the disastrous consequences of Gideon’s sins. “His ephod paved the way for apostasy, and his polygamous marriages sowed the

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48. Rudolph F. Norden, *Parables of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1964) 46.

seeds for civil war.”<sup>49</sup> Later in Judges 16, God punished the judge Samson for his insouciant attitude toward the commands of God. His great strength was taken away when Delilah cut his hair and broke his Nazirite vow (Judg 16:18–20).

The result of Abimelek’s disobedience would also be punishment from God. He would not get away with blatant disrespect of the guidelines established by God. “Indeed, God had intervened to end the rule of ruthless Abimelech, in exact fulfillment of Jotham’s words.”<sup>50</sup>

It’s been noted above that no mention of the name of the Lord is made in Judges 9. Jotham also failed to make mention of the divine name in his speech to the men of Shechem. When Jotham introduced his mysterious fable, he used the more generic name for God, אלהים. He began his address by shouting, “Listen to me, citizens of Shechem, so that God (אלהים) may listen to you” (Judg 9:7). Butler notes that the driving force behind Jotham’s speech is “a defense of his father, not [a defense] in the name of God.”<sup>51</sup> And when God did communicate in this narrative, “[He] no longer speaks to the Israelites (as in 2:1–3), but about them.”<sup>52</sup> The silence concerning the name of the Most High is defining to the ears of the faithful.

Scholars such as Schipper believe that Jotham’s parable, which continued to use the kingly language as was introduced in Judges 9:6, was not meant to comment on kingship or leadership at all. Schipper states, “Jotham does not intend to present a clear message about the merits of monarchy or any other institution through his parable. It does not function as a lesson regarding the proper form of leadership for his addressees. Instead, it functions as a

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49. Braun, *Judges*.

50. Norden, *Parables*, 47.

51. Butler, *Judges*, 239.

52. Webb, *Judges*, 156.

condemnation of the choices that his addressees have already made.”<sup>53</sup> Webb has similar thoughts concerning kingship in Judges. “Israel’s future could not be secured by creating a new institution. Only a wholehearted return to Yahweh could do that .... Kingship is seen in an unfavorable light, but it is not rejected on principle.”<sup>54</sup>

While the overall purpose of Jotham’s parable was to defend the name of his family, as noted above, his use of kingly language need not be downplayed. This paper has previously referred to the language of monarchy that exists in the book of Judges. The noun מֶלֶךְ was used twice in Jotham’s discourse (Judg 9:8, 15). The verb from the same root, מָלַךְ, was used six times in this brief speech (Judg 9:8, 10, 12, 14, 16, 18). The reference to monarchy in Judges 9:6 was not merely accidental or insignificant; Jotham expanded upon and amplified this unique and unexpected language during a time when “Israel had no king” (Judg 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). Jotham’s parable clearly portrayed Abimelek as a king, though he lacked both a directive from God and support from the nation. His “kingship” was more akin to the local rule enacted by the various judges, as seen in the narrative of Judges 9.

In the end, Jotham’s parable proved to be prophetic.<sup>55</sup> The bramble trusted in his own abilities and would be burned up in three years. His scheming ultimately amounted to nothing, or as Carman puts it, he was “quite unsuccessful.”<sup>56</sup> There was no question how the account of the

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53. Jeremy Schipper, *Parables and Conflict in the Hebrew Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 26. Schipper does also state that “the parable may participate in the book of Judges’ larger discourse on the merits of various institutions of leadership.” However, his primary view is the one explicated in the body of the essay.

54. Webb, *Judges*, 297.

55. Clarence E. Macartney, *The Parables of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1995), 14.

56. Jon-Michael Carman, “Abimelech the Manly Man? Judges 9:1–57 and the Performance of Hegemonic Masculinity,” in *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 43, no. 3 (2019): 307.

godless anti-judge Abimelek will end. Destruction would come upon Abimelek and the men who anointed him as king.

### **Judges 9:22–24: The Beginning of the End**

<sup>22</sup> After Abimelek had governed Israel three years, <sup>23</sup> God stirred up animosity between Abimelek and the citizens of Shechem so that they acted treacherously against Abimelek. <sup>24</sup> God did this in order that the crime against Jerub-Baal's seventy sons, the shedding of their blood, might be avenged on their brother Abimelek and on the citizens of Shechem, who had helped him murder his brothers (NIV 2011).

It took only three short years for the relationship between Abimelek and the Shechemites to deteriorate. This was shorter than any of the judgeships listed in the book of Judges. God did not delay long in bringing about the consequences of sin.

The term “Israel” can lead to confusion in this section. One should not think of the rule of Abimelek as uniting the entirety of the twelve tribes of Jacob. The parameters of his domain were laid out during the course of Judges 9. Based on “archeological, geographical, and toponymic evidence,” McKinny and Tavger conclude that “the identifications of Ophrah, Arumah, Mount Zalmon, Beer and Thebez in the same region clarify the geographical background of the story and demonstrate that the text is a local narrative that connects these locales to the administrative center of Shechem.”<sup>57</sup> Younger sees a spiritual rather than geographic significance in the mention of Israel in Judges 9:22. “‘Israel’ in this verse technically only refers to those Israelites who have recognized Abimelek’s authority, that is, Shechem and its environs. But its use is certainly a means of the narrator to remind the reader that it was

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57. Chris McKinny and Aharon Tavger, “Flames from the Bramble – The Geography of the Abimelech Episode in Judges 9 and the Identification of Beth-millo,” *Journal for the Study of Archaeology and History of Highland’s Region* 7 (2017), 11, 23.

Israel’s covenantal disloyalty and unfaithfulness that have led to these events.”<sup>58</sup> Block even more emphatically asserts, using a play on Gideon’s nickname “Jerub-Baal,” that “Israel has been totally Canaanized; Baal has contended for himself and prevailed.”<sup>59</sup>

Not only was Abimelek not appointed by the Lord to rule this region, but God stirred up an evil spirit between Abimelek and the men of Shechem. The NIV 2011 translation seen above translated verse 23, “God stirred up animosity.” A more literal rendering would be “God sent (וַיִּשְׁלַח אֱלֹהִים) an evil spirit (רוּחַ רָעָה).” Many English translations opt for a more literal rendering of this verse. “And God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the leaders of Shechem” (Judg 9:23 ESV). A literal rendering of the phrase וַיִּשְׁלַח אֱלֹהִים רוּחַ רָעָה is the preferred translation of this author.<sup>60</sup> A more literal translation of this verse strengthens the connection between what God did to Abimelek and what he would do to Saul in 1 Samuel 16:14. Many parallels exist between Abimelek and Saul, including a lack of fear of the Lord and fatal injury at the hands of an enemy which result in the request for a mercy kill from a compatriot (1 Sam 15:22–23; 31:1–5). While Saul was anointed by a prophet of God and later deposed, Abimelek did not even have an initial anointing from God. The only apparent connection he has to the Lord is an evil spirit that God sent to create disunity between himself and the men of Shechem.

There is no recorded evidence that God sent an evil spirit against any of the other judges. Other judges received the “רוּחַ-יְהוָה,” but never a “רוּחַ רָעָה” (Judg 3:10; 6:34; 11:29; 13:25;

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58. Younger, *Judges*, 224.

59. Block, *Judges*, 308.

60. See the CSB, EHV, HCSB, KJ21, NIV 1984, NASB1995, RSV, and many others.

61. The NIV2011’s departure from the literal is particularly puzzling given their translation of 1 Samuel 16:14. The same Hebrew phrase, “רוּחַ רָעָה,” is translated “an evil spirit.”

14:6, 19; 15:14). God did leave Samson after his hair was cut (Judg 16:20). But God later looked with favor on Samson and answered his prayer to “get revenge on the Philistines for [his] two eyes” (Judg 16:28). Only Abimelek received an evil spirit from God.

One political leader in the Old Testament that is also said to have a “רוח רָעָה” is Saul, the first anointed king of Israel (1 Sam 16:14). This “evil spirit” comes upon Saul after “the Spirit of the LORD had departed from Saul” (1 Sam 16:14). When the evil spirit causes Saul distress, David, the future king of Israel, plays music to sooth him (1 Sam 16:15–23). Oeste notes that the presence of a “רוח רָעָה” marks the beginning of decline for both Saul and Abimelek.<sup>62</sup> “In both cases, the advent of the evil spirit from God springs from a failure to act under Yahweh’s sanction, it coincides with a rift between the king and his followers, and it also coincides with a transfer of the people’s support to another leader.”<sup>63</sup>

After the evil spirit comes upon him, Saul attempts many times to take the life of his political rival and threat to the throne, David (1 Sam 19–24). What Saul fails to achieve, Abimelek succeeds in carrying to near-completion on one stone in Ophrah even before a specific mention of an evil spirit coming upon him (Judg 9:5). Only Jotham escaped the wrath of a man bent toward evil before any mention of a “רוח רָעָה.”

These verses also record the Shechemites’ rejection of their once-lauded ruler. They no longer wished for Abimelek to rule over them, and soon their eyes would wander toward another ruler, Gaal (Judg 9:25–41). The rejection of a judge was rare. Gideon did not receive complete support from the men of Sukkoth and Peniel, but his people as a whole still accepted him as their ruler. They even offered him kingship if he so desired (Judg 8:22). The elders of Gilead

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62. Oeste, *Legitimacy*, 146.

63. Oeste, *Legitimacy*, 146.

personally requested that Jephthah save them from the hands of the Ammonites, which he did successfully (Judg 11:4–11). Following the victory against the Ammonites, Jephthah was unexpectedly met with animosity from the Ephraimites. “Instead of congratulating Jephthah for his accomplishment and thanking him for delivering them from the Ammonite threat, in their jealousy and wounded sense of self-importance the Ephraimites are determined to destroy the deliverer.”<sup>64</sup> The rebellion of Ephraim results in the death of 42,000 Ephraimites. Rebellion seemed to be on the rise after the death of Gideon. Younger summarizes the direction the book of Judges is heading. “This intertribal feud under Jephthah is part of a thematic development (progressive internal disintegration) that reaches its climax in the civil war involving the whole of Israel at the end of the book (chs 19–21).”<sup>65</sup> The attitude of insurrection that ensued during Abimelek’s reign continued after his death.

### **Judges 9:25–49: God’s Vengeance on Shechem**

<sup>25</sup> In opposition to him these citizens of Shechem set men on the hilltops to ambush and rob everyone who passed by, and this was reported to Abimelek.

<sup>26</sup> Now Gaal son of Ebed moved with his clan into Shechem, and its citizens put their confidence in him. <sup>27</sup> After they had gone out into the fields and gathered the grapes and trodden them, they held a festival in the temple of their god. While they were eating and drinking, they cursed Abimelek. <sup>28</sup> Then Gaal son of Ebed said, “Who is Abimelek, and why should we Shechemites be subject to him? Isn’t he Jerub-Baal’s son, and isn’t Zebul his deputy? Serve the family of Hamor, Shechem’s father! Why should we serve Abimelek? <sup>29</sup> If only this people were under my command! Then I would get rid of him. I would say to Abimelek, ‘Call out your whole army!’”

<sup>30</sup> When Zebul the governor of the city heard what Gaal son of Ebed said, he was very angry. <sup>31</sup> Under cover he sent messengers to Abimelek, saying, “Gaal son of Ebed and his

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64. Younger, *Judges*, 271.

65. Younger, *Judges*, 274.

clan have come to Shechem and are stirring up the city against you. <sup>32</sup> Now then, during the night you and your men should come and lie in wait in the fields. <sup>33</sup> In the morning at sunrise, advance against the city. When Gaal and his men come out against you, seize the opportunity to attack them.”

<sup>34</sup> So Abimelek and all his troops set out by night and took up concealed positions near Shechem in four companies. <sup>35</sup> Now Gaal son of Ebed had gone out and was standing at the entrance of the city gate just as Abimelek and his troops came out from their hiding place.

<sup>36</sup> When Gaal saw them, he said to Zebul, “Look, people are coming down from the tops of the mountains!”

Zebul replied, “You mistake the shadows of the mountains for men.”

<sup>37</sup> But Gaal spoke up again: “Look, people are coming down from the central hill, and a company is coming from the direction of the diviners’ tree.”

<sup>38</sup> Then Zebul said to him, “Where is your big talk now, you who said, ‘Who is Abimelek that we should be subject to him?’ Aren’t these the men you ridiculed? Go out and fight them!”

<sup>39</sup> So Gaal led out the citizens of Shechem and fought Abimelek. <sup>40</sup> Abimelek chased him all the way to the entrance of the gate, and many were killed as they fled. <sup>41</sup> Then Abimelek stayed in Arumah, and Zebul drove Gaal and his clan out of Shechem.

<sup>42</sup> The next day the people of Shechem went out to the fields, and this was reported to Abimelek. <sup>43</sup> So he took his men, divided them into three companies and set an ambush in the fields. When he saw the people coming out of the city, he rose to attack them. <sup>44</sup> Abimelek and the companies with him rushed forward to a position at the entrance of the city gate. Then two companies attacked those in the fields and struck them down. <sup>45</sup> All that day Abimelek pressed his attack against the city until he had captured it and killed its people. Then he destroyed the city and scattered salt over it.

<sup>46</sup> On hearing this, the citizens in the tower of Shechem went into the stronghold of the temple of El-Berith. <sup>47</sup> When Abimelek heard that they had assembled there, <sup>48</sup> he and all his men went up Mount Zalmon. He took an ax and cut off some branches, which he lifted to his shoulders. He ordered the men with him, “Quick! Do what you have seen me do!” <sup>49</sup> So all the men cut branches and followed Abimelek. They piled them against the stronghold and set it on fire with the people still inside. So all the people in the tower of Shechem, about a thousand men and women, also died (NIV 2011).

Many have noted the cyclical nature of the book of Judges. After enduring hardship and oppression, the people did get to experience peace for a time during the rest of the life of the judge.



The grateful response of the people to Abimelek’s father, Gideon, their deliverer from the Midianites, was clear. The people respected Gideon, and they appreciated the peace that he brought them. They wanted the good times to keep going, so they offer him kingship over the Israelites. “Rule over us—you, your son and your grandson—because you have saved us from the hand of Midian” (Judg 8:22). But God did not want his people to have an earthly king. He wanted to remain their king in his appointed theocratic system. Even at the time of Moses, the Lord knew that the people would grow tired of this style of governance. “When you enter the land the LORD your God is giving you and have taken possession of it and settled in it, and you say, ‘Let us set a king over us like all the nations around us,’ be sure to appoint over you a king the LORD your God chooses. He must be from among your fellow Israelites. Do not place a foreigner over you, one who is not an Israelite” (Deut 17:14–15).

The issue was not that the people appreciated Gideon. In fact, one could say that they appreciated him too much. While his abilities as a military leader were undeniable, his views on spirituality were lacking.<sup>66</sup> Gideon led the Israelites spiritually astray through the use of the ephod that he created (Judg 8:27).<sup>67</sup> Instead of thanking the Lord for deliverance, Gideon became the focus. Bluedorn states, “The ephod thus becomes a memorial to remember Gideon’s achievement.”<sup>68</sup> The people’s undying support of Gideon led them to fall into sin.

There was a stark contrast between the reception of Gideon and his son, Abimelek. While Gideon was loved by the Israelites and was offered kingship, Abimelek was met with a more

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66. Younger, *Judges*, 34.

67. *Concordia Self-Study Bible New International Version* asserts that “in many ways Gideon is the ideal judge, evoking memory of Moses...” Hoerber, ed., *Concordia*, 326. It’s this author’s opinion that any leader who establishes idolatry cannot be the “ideal” leader.

68. Wolfgang Bluedorn, *Yahweh Versus Baalism: A Theological Reading of the Gideon-Abimelech Narrative* (London: A & C Black, 2001), 131.

apathetic response. It was Abimelek who took the first step to approach the Shechemites. Even once he became their ruler, their opinion of him quickly soured. It took only three years for another leader to catch their wandering eye. There is no evidence that any other judge of Israel is rejected by his people after he assumed leadership.

### **Judges 9:50–55: God’s Vengeance on Abimelek**

<sup>50</sup> Next Abimelek went to Thebez and besieged it and captured it. <sup>51</sup> Inside the city, however, was a strong tower, to which all the men and women—all the people of the city—had fled. They had locked themselves in and climbed up on the tower roof. <sup>52</sup> Abimelek went to the tower and attacked it. But as he approached the entrance to the tower to set it on fire, <sup>53</sup> a woman dropped an upper millstone on his head and cracked his skull.

<sup>54</sup> Hurriedly he called to his armor-bearer, “Draw your sword and kill me, so that they can’t say, ‘A woman killed him.’” So his servant ran him through, and he died. <sup>55</sup> When the Israelites saw that Abimelek was dead, they went home (NIV 2011).

Abimelek was not interested in power for the benefit of his people. He was interested in ruling over people insomuch as they didn’t get in the way of his authority. Michael Wilcock writes, “Authority in Judges 9 is a matter not of judging or of delivering, but of ruling, the ominous word first introduced when Israel offered the kingship to Gideon (8:22).”<sup>69</sup> Violence was not a method for keeping the peace; instead, it was a means to grow his sphere of influence. “Rather than aiding Israel, Abimelech ends up sowing discord and violence.”<sup>70</sup> Younger compares the actions of Abimelek to Adolf Hitler.<sup>71</sup>

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69. Wilcock, *Judges*, 89.

70. Carman, “Abimelech the Manly Man,” 301.

71. Younger, *Judges*, 234.

It is also noteworthy that Abimelek did not end his violent rampage once the rebellious Shechemites were put to death. He continued toward Thebez and tried to murder its citizens as well. Ironically, this ultimately led to his own demise, as was foretold by Jotham. The rage-filled bramble burned himself up too. Or, as Norden phrases it as he reflects upon Jotham's parable, "The bramble-like Abimelech, who had shed much blood, was himself to come to an abject end."<sup>72</sup> He risked his life for personal gain and received his just reward.

Abimelek's end was portrayed with a great deal of shame. This "ruler" had not been able to keep his citizens from rebelling. He managed to get revenge against the rebellious Shechemites, but this revenge fulfilled a prophesy spoken by the brother he failed to kill. And he did not die a glorious death on the open field at the hands of a "worthy" adversary. His end was brought about by a woman using an ordinary household item. Oeste notes the irony in Abimelek's death at the hands of a woman using an upper millstone. "A millstone was so valuable that a lender could not accept it in a pledge, 'For that would be taking a life in a pledge' (Deut 24:6 NRSV). Abimelech treated the lives of his brothers in Ophrah cheaply, trading one life for one piece of silver. However, in Thebez, the equivalent value of one life bought the freedom of many."<sup>73</sup> While he did not literally go up in flames as the Shechemites did, perhaps he would have liked to die in that manner instead of at the hands of a woman.<sup>74</sup> He so desperately wanted to avoid the lasting stain of being killed by a woman that he chose to have his armor-bearer take his life (Judg 9:54). Block summarizes the death of Abimelek. "He who slaughtered

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72. Norden, *Parables*, 47.

73. Oeste, *Legitimacy*, 111.

74. Oeste, *Legitimacy*, 111.

his brothers ‘upon one stone’ had his skull crushed beneath one stone... Ironically, when the enemy is within, rather than without, God withdraws his gracious hand.”<sup>75</sup>

Israel’s first king, Saul, also died under shameful circumstances. He led Israel in a fight against the Philistines. The Philistines were victorious, routing the Israelite army and slaying the sons of Saul in the process (1 Sam 31:1–2). Saul himself was wounded in the fight by the Philistine archers (1 Sam 31:3). Instead of dying at the hands of his enemies, Saul wanted his armor-bearer to end his life instead. He told his armor-bearer, “Draw your sword and run me through, or these uncircumcised fellows will come and run me through and abuse me” (1 Sam 31:4). When his compatriot refused to take the life of his king, “Saul took his own sword and fell on it” (1 Sam 31:4). Saul’s armor-bearer did not carry out his master’s order as Abimelek’s armor-bearer had done, yet the motives and actions of these two rulers was the same. They attempted to escape a shameful death, but in the end they were remembered in disgrace nonetheless.

The capture and subsequent torture of the judge Samson was shameful. But God gave him a glorious end by answering his prayer and giving him the strength to kill more Philistines in his death than he had in his life (Judg 16:30). But Abimelek received no glory, only shame, in his last breaths. All his scheming ultimately amounted to nothing.

### **Judges 9:56–57 Assessment of Abimelek’s Rule**

<sup>56</sup> Thus God repaid the wickedness that Abimelek had done to his father by murdering his seventy brothers. <sup>57</sup> God also made the people of Shechem pay for all their wickedness. The curse of Jotham son of Jerub-Baal came on them (NIV 2011).

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75. Block, *Judges*, 335.

With his death at the hands of the woman of Thebez, the rule of Abimelek came to a close after only three short years. The rule of Abimelek is the shortest of any secular authority recorded in the book of Judges.

Typically, the death of a judge would result in another period of spiritual adultery followed by attacks from God's enemies. The account of Abimelek contains no such cycle because there was never a time of peace in the first place. No one had called out to God for help. Abimelek had not been raised by the Lord to deliver his people. Instead, once Abimelek was dead, the people of Israel simply went back to their homes and returned to their lives (Judg 9:55). Abimelek's grab for kingship was an utter failure leaving only death and destruction in its wake. There was no lasting benefit for Abimelek or God's people. Butler summarizes the account of Abimelek well. "God is the only winner, proving, despite his virtual absence in the narrative, a strong presence as the king who did not abdicate."<sup>76</sup>

There were times when God would allow a godless person to remain in their position of authority even after they turned their back on him. For instance, King Saul ruled for 40 years even though he rejected the Lord in the middle of his reign (1 Sam 15:11–29). Abimelek, however, quickly received the punishment for his transgressions. The King of Heaven took revenge on the "king" of Shechem for his lack of godliness and his reprehensible treatment of the family of his appointed judge Gideon. Butler applies God's response to the aspirations of Abimelek to leadership in general. "Divine retribution is a means of demonstrating the ongoing power of Yahweh and the utter failure of kingship instigated by an individual's thirst for power rather than by divine calling."<sup>77</sup>

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76. Butler, *Judges*, 250.

77. Butler, *Judges*, 243.

Abimelek had no lasting effect on the Israelites. Abimelek's name receives no praise in the rest of Scripture, only a lasting stain. Roughly 150 years later, Joab instructed a messenger sent to David with a reference to Abimelek's death:

Joab sent David a full account of the battle. He instructed the messenger: 'When you have finished giving the king this account of the battle, the king's anger may flare up, and he may ask you, 'Why did you get so close to the city to fight? Didn't you know they would shoot arrows from the wall? Who killed Abimelek son of Jerub-Besheth? Didn't a woman drop an upper millstone on him from the wall, so that he died in Thebez? Why did you get so close to the wall?' (2 Sam 11:18–21).

Joab supposed that the name "my father is king" could be on the lips of a duly anointed king to express military folly.

In contrast, other judges receive praise in the rest of Scripture. In the New Testament epistle to the Hebrews, four judges are mentioned by name in the great "heroes of faith" section of the Bible.<sup>78</sup> "And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah... who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised... whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies" (Heb 11:32–34) This section of Scripture in no way promotes the immorality that still existed in these men. But it does shed light on their faith, no matter how small it may have been. The writer to the Hebrews holds these four judges up as an example for Christians and attests to the fact that "we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses" (Heb 12:1).

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78. Bruce uses this terminology in his commentary. It has been used in numerous other publications. F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 342.

## CONCLUSION

What is a modern reader to make of the unique, sordid account of Abimelek? Consider first the motives of a temporal ruler. The judges appointed by God did not select themselves to deliver God's people from their oppression. It was the Lord who selected them for their role of judge. When they maintain a focus on God and, when selfish motives are put aside, work for the good of the people, there was peace in the land. The downward spiral of the period of the judges was inaugurated by judges who take actions based on personal ambitions and desires. Abimelek fully embodies the selfish attitude of other judges, and he does so without a call from the Lord. Temporal leaders today do not have a direct calling from the Lord, as his judges did. They should be leery of mimicking the selfish attitude of the judges, both those called and those not, lest their efforts result in nothing but flames.

From the perspective of those being ruled, one notes the grace of God shown to the masses when a secular authority acts with wisdom. Times of peace can be rare in a sin-ruined world. Yet the Israelites enjoyed times of peace during the lives of God's judges. When people today have leaders that promote peace, God be praised. Christians are not promised peace, though they recognize the benefits peace brings for advancing God's kingdom.

Regardless of the morality of our leaders, Christians have a duty to respect them. The Apostle Paul writes concerning the respect Christians have toward their governing officials. "Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, whoever

rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves” (Romans 13:1–2). There will be temporal leaders who are in it solely for power and wealth. One sees that desire in Abimelek in Judges 9. That sin still exists today. And yet God still accomplishes his will, even when secular powers act in an ungodly manner. Praise be to God who was in control before Abimelek’s rise to power, who guided history during Abimelek’s reign, and who still lives and rules today into eternity.



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