

Judges

Chapter 9

Abimelech

Abimelech son of Jerub-Baal went to his mother's brothers in Shechem and said to them and to all his mother's clan, ² "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." ³ When the brothers repeated all this to the citizens of Shechem, they were inclined to follow Abimelech, for they said, "He is our brother." ⁴ They gave him seventy shekels of silver from the temple of Baal-Berith, and Abimelech used it to hire reckless adventurers, who became his followers. ⁵ 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. ⁶ Then all the citizens of Shechem and Beth Millo gathered beside the great tree at the pillar in Shechem to crown Abimelech king. ⁷ 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. ⁸ One day the trees went out to anoint a king for themselves. They said to the olive tree, 'Be our king.' ⁹ "But the olive tree answered, 'Should I give up my oil, by which both gods and men are honored, to hold sway over the trees?' ¹⁰ "Next, the trees said to the fig tree, 'Come and be our king.' ¹¹ "But the fig tree replied, 'Should I give up my fruit, so good and sweet, to hold sway over the trees?' ¹² "Then the trees said to the vine, 'Come and be our king.' ¹³ "But the vine answered, 'Should I give up my wine, which cheers both gods and men, to hold sway over the trees?' ¹⁴ "Finally all the trees said to the thornbush, 'Come and be our king.' ¹⁵ "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!' ¹⁶ "Now if you have acted honorably and in good faith when you made Abimelech king, and if you have been fair to Jerub-Baal and his family, and if you have treated him as he deserves— ¹⁷ and to think that my father fought for you, risked his life to rescue you from the hand of Midian ¹⁸ (but today you have revolted against my father's family, murdered his seventy sons on a single stone, and made Abimelech, the son of his slave girl, king over the citizens of Shechem because he is your brother)— ¹⁹ if then you have acted honorably and in good faith toward Jerub-Baal and his family today, may Abimelech be your joy, and may you be his, too! ²⁰ But if you have not, let fire come out from Abimelech and consume you, citizens of Shechem and Beth Millo, and let fire come out from you, citizens of Shechem and Beth Millo, and consume Abimelech!" ²¹ Then Jotham fled, escaping to Beer, and he lived there because he was afraid of his brother Abimelech. ²² After Abimelech had governed Israel three years, ²³ God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the citizens of Shechem, who acted treacherously against Abimelech. ²⁴ 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 Abimelech and on the citizens of

Shechem, who had helped him murder his brothers.²⁵ 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 Abimelech.²⁶ Now Gaal son of Ebed moved with his brothers into Shechem, and its citizens put their confidence in him.²⁷ 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 Abimelech.²⁸ Then Gaal son of Ebed said, “Who is Abimelech, and who is Shechem, that we should be subject to him? Isn’t he Jerub-Baal’s son, and isn’t Zebul his deputy? Serve the men of Hamor, Shechem’s father! Why should we serve Abimelech?”²⁹ If only this people were under my command! Then I would get rid of him. I would say to Abimelech, ‘Call out your whole army!’”³⁰ When Zebul the governor of the city heard what Gaal son of Ebed said, he was very angry.³¹ Under cover he sent messengers to Abimelech, saying, “Gaal son of Ebed and his brothers have come to Shechem and are stirring up the city against you.³² Now then, during the night you and your men should come and lie in wait in the fields.³³ In the morning at sunrise, advance against the city. When Gaal and his men come out against you, do whatever your hand finds to do.”³⁴ So Abimelech and all his troops set out by night and took up concealed positions near Shechem in four companies.³⁵ Now Gaal son of Ebed had gone out and was standing at the entrance to the city gate just as Abimelech and his soldiers came out from their hiding place.³⁶ 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.”³⁷ But Gaal spoke up again: “Look, people are coming down from the center of the land, and a company is coming from the direction of the soothsayers’ tree.”³⁸ Then Zebul said to him, “Where is your big talk now, you who said, ‘Who is Abimelech that we should be subject to him?’ Aren’t these the men you ridiculed? Go out and fight them!”³⁹ So Gaal led out the citizens of Shechem and fought Abimelech.⁴⁰ Abimelech chased him, and many fell wounded in the flight—all the way to the entrance to the gate.⁴¹ Abimelech stayed in Arumah, and Zebul drove Gaal and his brothers out of Shechem.⁴² The next day the people of Shechem went out to the fields, and this was reported to Abimelech.⁴³ 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.⁴⁴ Abimelech and the companies with him rushed forward to a position at the entrance to the city gate. Then two companies rushed upon those in the fields and struck them down.⁴⁵ All that day Abimelech 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.⁴⁶ On hearing this, the citizens in the tower of Shechem went into the stronghold of the temple of El-Berith.⁴⁷ When Abimelech heard that they had assembled there,⁴⁸ 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!”⁴⁹ So all the men cut branches and followed Abimelech. They piled them against the stronghold and set it on fire over the people inside. So all the people in the tower of Shechem, about a thousand men and women, also died.⁵⁰ Next Abimelech went to Thebez and

besieged it and captured it.⁵¹ Inside the city, however, was a strong tower, to which all the men and women—all the people of the city—fled. They locked themselves in and climbed up on the tower roof.⁵² Abimelech went to the tower and stormed it. But as he approached the entrance to the tower to set it on fire,⁵³ a woman dropped an upper millstone on his head and cracked his skull.⁵⁴ 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.⁵⁵ When the Israelites saw that Abimelech was dead, they went home.⁵⁶ Thus God repaid the wickedness that Abimelech had done to his father by murdering his seventy brothers.⁵⁷ God also made the men of Shechem pay for all their wickedness. The curse of Jotham son of Jerub-Baal came on them.

9:1–57 The stories of Gideon and Abimelech form the literary center of Judges (see Introduction: Literary Features). Abimelech, who tried to set himself up like a Canaanite city king with the help of Baal (v. 4), stands in sharp contrast to his father Gideon (Jerub-Baal), who had attacked Baal worship and insisted that the Lord ruled over Israel. Abimelech attempted this Canaanite revival in the very place where Joshua had earlier reaffirmed Israel’s allegiance to the Lord (Jos 24:14–27). In every respect Abimelech was the antithesis of the Lord’s appointed judges. (CSB)

Ch 9 Abimelech’s story illustrates a tragically flawed attempt at kingship during the judges era. He acted willfully throughout. The lack of tribal designations in ch 9 probably reflects the weak association these people had with Israel. Archaeology confirms that Israelites and Canaanites lived alongside one another for centuries at Shechem. (TLSB)

9:1 *Abimelech*. See note, 8:31. This oppressor of Israel was half-Israelite, half-Canaanite. (TLSB)

Shechem. See note on Ge 33:18. Ruins dating from the Canaanite era give evidence of a sacred area, probably to be associated with the temple of Baal-Berith or El-Berith (vv. 4, 46). Archaeological evidence, which is compatible with the destruction of Shechem by Abimelech, indicates that its sacred area was used only for secular purposes after this time. (CSB)

9:2 *citizens*. The singular form of the Hebrew for this word is *ba’al*. It means “lord” or “owner” and probably refers here to the aristocracy or landowners of the city. (CSB)

flesh and blood. Being half-Canaanite, Abimelech intimated that it was in their best interest to make him king rather than be under the rule of Gideon’s 70 sons. The following he gathered was based on this relationship and became a threat to the people of Israel. (CSB)

Abimelech must have felt monarchy was inevitable and that the people’s only choice concerned who their monarch would be. (TLSB)

9:4 *seventy pieces of silver out of the house of Baal-berith*. Cf 8:33. Ancient temples also served as depositories for personal and government money. (TLSB)

from the temple. Ancient temples served as depositories for personal and civic funds. The payments of vows and penalties, as well as gifts, were also part of the temple treasury. (CSB)

reckless adventurers. Use of mercenaries to accomplish political or military goals was common in ancient times. Others who used them are Jephthah (11:3), David (1Sa 22:1–2), Absalom (2Sa 15:1), Adonijah (1Ki 1:5), Rezon (1Ki 11:23–24) and Jeroboam (2Ch 13:6–7). (CSB)

The Israelite majority were greatly influenced by Canaanite religion and culture. (TLSB)

9:5 *on one stone.* Abimelech’s 70 brothers were slaughtered like sacrificial animals (see 13:19–20; 1Sa 14:33–34). In effect he inaugurated his kingship by using his Israelite half brothers as his coronation sacrifices (see 2Sa 15:10, 12; 1Ki 1:5, 9; 3:4). (CSB)

He killed his brothers in a ritual execution. (TLSB)

9:6 *Beth Millo.* “Millo” is derived from a Hebrew verb meaning “to fill” and probably refers to the earthen fill used to erect a platform on which walls and other large structures were built. Beth Millo may be identical to the “stronghold” of v. 46. (CSB)

“House of filling-in,” referring to earthen fill or rubble used to build a platform for walls and other structures. (TLSB)

made Abimelech king. Probably a local ruler for the people around Shechem. (TLSB)

great tree. See Jos 24:25–26; see also note on Ge 12:6. (CSB)

pillar. A large stone (“stela”) set up as a monument (cf Is 29:3, where the term is used in a military context). (TLSB)

9:7 *top.* Probably a ledge that overlooked the city. (CSB)

God may listen to you. Jotham hoped to persuade people that Abimelech was a poor choice to be their king. If they would reject Abimelech, God would answer their prayers. Jotham spoke as a prophet might speak, but he is never called a prophet. (TLSB)

9:8 *trees went out.* Fables of this type, in which inanimate objects speak and act, were popular among Eastern peoples of that time (see 2Ki 14:9). (CSB)

9:8–15 Jotham’s parable features plants that can speak, representing various rulers; first parable recorded in Scripture. Jotham’s story did not oppose kingship but rejected Abimelech as king. The olive tree, fig tree, and vine all produced abundant food in the land, but the bramble was worthless and its thorns were harmful. The parable also voiced a warning to the Shechemites. If

they had not made their choice in good faith, and if their choice did not give proper recognition to Abimelech's father and his family, the "bramble" would stir a fire that would devour their beautiful "cedars." (TLSB)

9:9–13 The olive tree, the fig tree and the vine were all plants that produced fruit of great importance to the people of the Near East. (CSB)

9:13 *gods*. It was commonly believed that the gods participated in such human experiences as drinking wine. (CSB)

9:14 *thornbush*. Probably the well-known buckthorn, a scraggly bush common in the hills of Palestine and a constant menace to farming. It produced nothing of value and was an apt figure for Abimelech. (CSB)

9:15 *shade*. Ironically, in offering shade to the trees, the thornbush symbolized the traditional role of kings as protectors of their subjects (see Isa 30:2–3; 32:1–2; La 4:20; Da 4:12). *cedars of Lebanon*. The most valuable of Near Eastern trees, here symbolic of the leading men of Shechem (see v. 20). (CSB)

9:16 *good faith and integrity*. Jotham's conclusion is sarcastic. Because neither Abimelech nor the Shechemites had acted in good faith and integrity, they could each rejoice in the other. (TLSB)

9:18 *female servant*. Concubine. (TLSB)

9:20 *fire come out ... and consume*. A grim prediction that Abimelech and the people of Shechem would destroy each other. Fire spreads rapidly through bramble bushes and brings about swift destruction (see Ex 22:6; Isa 9:18). (CSB)

A curse, anticipating that the conspirators would destroy one another. (TLSB)

9:21 *Beer*. A very common name, meaning "a well." (CSB)

Most likely in Moab. (TLSB)

9:1–21 Abimelech, Gideon's illegitimate son, brutally murders his 70 brothers and has himself appointed king in Shechem. One brother, however, manages to escape and in a parable warns that Abimelech is unworthy of the office. Today, the Lord calls us to act with integrity when we choose our leaders or when we speak up against them. Through God's Word we learn genuine integrity, which the Holy Spirit produces in sinners through the Word of Christ, our Savior. • Heavenly Father, forgive our lack of integrity and failure to follow Your Word. Make us bold to speak the truth with integrity from You. Amen. (TLSB)

9:22 *ruled*. During his three years as ruler in the central region of Israel, Abimelech exploited Israel and did not rule for people's benefit. (TLSB)

Israel. Those Israelites who recognized Abimelech's authority, mainly in the vicinity of Shechem. (CSB)

9:23 *evil spirit.* Perhaps a spirit of distrust and bitterness. The Hebrew for "spirit" is often used to describe an attitude or disposition. (CSB)

The Lord allows Satan and his evil angels to inspire an attitude of distrust and bitterness. (TLSB)

acted treacherously. The one who founded his kingdom by treachery is himself undone by treachery. (CSB)

The Shechemites' true character became obvious. Their unhappiness with Abimelech may have arisen because Abimelech did not reside in their city (cf v 26; 41), and they had not benefited from his kingship. (TLSB)

9:25 *ambush against him on the mountaintops.* Shechem lay on the most important trade route through the central hill country of Canaan, where most Israelites dwelt. People expected a king to collect taxes from passing merchants and in return provide the merchants safe travel. The robbers stole Abimelech's profit and his reputation. (TLSB)

9:26 *Gaal.* Another character entered the drama and won the confidence of the disgruntled Shechemites. Just as they had conspired with Abimelech against their rightful rulers, so they conspired with Gaal against Abimelech. (TLSB)

put their confidence in him. Just as the fickle population had followed Abimelech, so they are now swayed by the deceptive proposals of Gaal. (CSB)

9:27 *gathered the grapes.* Harvested in Aug and Sept. (TLSB)

held a festival. The vintage harvest was one of the most joyous times of the year (see Isa 16:9–10; Jer 25:30), but festivals and celebrations held at pagan temples often degenerated into debauched drinking affairs. (CSB)

Harvest festivals could disintegrate into debauchery, particularly when devoted to pagan gods. (TLSB)

house of their god. Cf 8:33. Temples were equipped with kitchens and banquet halls. (TLSB)

reviled Abimelech. As today, people enjoyed complaining about their government. (TLSB)

9:28 *son of Jerubbaal.* Baal worshipers complained about Abimelech, whose father, Gideon, had torn down Baal's altar (6:25–32) and reestablished worship of Yahweh. (TLSB)

Hamor. The Hivite ruler who had founded the city of Shechem (Ge 33:19; 34:2; Jos 24:32). (CSB)

Canaanite prince (Hivite; see p 345) who founded Shechem (Gn 33:19). (TLSB)

9:29 *under my hand!* Similar to the later would-be king Absalom, who stole the hearts of the people (cf 2Sm 15–18). (TLSB)

9:30–31 In Shechem, Zebul was angered by Gaal’s insurrection and, true to his loyalties, warned Abimelech. (TLSB)

9:32–33 *ambush.* Zebul proposed that Abimelech’s men attack the hungover followers of Gaal (cf v 27) at sunrise. (TLSB)

9:32 *lie in wait.* Ambush succeeded against Gibeah in Benjamin (20:37) and against Ai (Jos 8:2). (CSB)

9:34 *four companies.* Smaller segments meant less chance of detection. Also, attack from several directions was good strategy. (CSB)

Four smaller segments instead of one large mass of troops would decrease the chance of detection and cause the attack to come from several directions. (TLSB)

9:36 Zebul could be treacherous, as his misinformation shows. (TLSB)

9:37 *center of the land.* See note on Eze 38:12. (CSB)

soothsayers’ tree. Probably a sacred tree in some way related to the temple of Baal-Berith (see note on Ge 12:6). (CSB)

Large trees served as gathering points and as places of superstitious devotion. A diviner used interpretive methods to discern the will of the gods (e.g., reading signs in nature). Gaal’s vision was likely distorted from the previous night’s revelry (cf v 27). (TLSB)

9:38 *Where is your mouth now.* In panic, he ceased to be mouthy and boastful. (TLSB)

9:40 *fell ... up to the entrance.* Disastrous retreat to the city. (TLSB)

9:41 *lived.* Lit, “sat down.” (TLSB)

Arumah. Abimelech’s encampment. Zebul pressed the engagement. (TLSB)

9:42–43 Not satisfied with Gaal’s defeat, Abimelech attacked the unsuspecting Shechemites on their way out to their fields, because they had supported his enemy. Jotham’s parable (v 15) had come true: the “bramble” had brought “fire” to the city. (TLSB)

9:43 *three companies.* See note on 7:16. (CSB)

9:44–45 Abimelech’s attack blocked the people’s retreat to safety. (TLSB)

9:45 *scattered salt over it.* To condemn it to perpetual barrenness and desolation (see Dt 29:23; Ps 107:33–34; Jer 17:6; Zep 2:9). (CSB)

Plants could not grow in salt, so the land became an unproductive wilderness. The Romans did this to Carthage in 146 BC. (TLSB)

9:46 *leaders.* Lit, “lords,” the aristocrats of Shechem (cf v 6). (TLSB)

Tower. Taller fortress outside the city wall. Perhaps the “millo” (v 6). This tower may have been the Baal-berith temple (v 4). Communities built special fortifications because city walls could easily be breached. Such towers were squat-shaped piles of stone and debris (not the tall, hollow spires of later architecture). Archaeologists discovered a square base of unworked stones for such a tower at Giloh. (TLSB)

stronghold. Probably the Beth Millo of v. 6. (CSB)

El-Berith. Baal-Berith (v. 4). (CSB)

Lit, “god of the covenant.” Previously called Baal-berith (8:33; 9:4). Hbr *’el* could be used interchangeably with *baal*, “lord.” (TLSB)

9:48 *Mount Zalmon ... brushwood.* The high ground was still wooded. (TLSB)

9:49 *set it on fire.* In fulfillment of Jotham’s curse (v. 20). (CSB)

The heat may have expanded the stones of the tower, causing them to burst or fall from the wall. Smoke would have smothered the people. (TLSB)

9:50 *Thebez.* Usually identified as modern Tubas, 9 mi NE of Shechem, though recent scholarship suggests Tell el-Farah, 6 mi from Shechem. See Shechem on color map 1.

9:51 Apparently the town was loyal to Gaal. (TLSB)

strong tower. Probably located along the city’s edge, perhaps even constructed on the city wall. From the tower, defenders could deploy rocks, arrows, spears, or boiling water or oil on attackers below. Cf Pr 18:10. (TLSB)

9:52 Same strategy as in vv 48–49, but against a better fortress (“strong,” v 51). (TLSB)

9:53 *woman.* While the men used bows, arrows and spears, women helped to defend the tower by dropping heavy stones on those who came near it. (CSB)

upper millstone. See note on 3:16. The upper, revolving stone of a mill was circular, with a hole in the center. Grinding grain was women’s work (see Ex 11:5), usually considered too lowly for men to perform (see 16:21). Abimelech was killed by a woman using a domestic implement (see also 4:21). (CSB)

The “rider” stone rolled along a track carved in a larger lower stone. Descriptions of its size and shape vary: perhaps 1–1½ ft wide, 3–5 in thick, either circular or loaf-shaped. It was small enough to be used by one person. Milling grain was woman’s work. (TLSB)

9:54 *armor-bearer.* A military leader usually had a young man carry his shield and spear (see 1Sa 14:6; 31:4). (CSB)

A warrior’s apprentice, who maintained and bore the equipment. (TLSB)

A woman killed him. It was considered a disgrace for a soldier to die at the hands of a woman. Abimelech’s shameful death was long remembered (2Sa 11:21). (CSB)

Proud to the end, Abimelech tried to make the circumstances of his death appear more heroic. 3,200 years later, readers still learn that Abimelech was killed by a woman. Cf 5:26. (TLSB)

9:56 *God repaid.* God was in control of the events. As Israel’s true King, he brought Abimelech’s wickedness to a quick and shameful end. (CSB)

He who by a stone once overcame (v 18) was likewise by a stone overcome (v 53). God avenged the blood of His servant Gideon. (TLSB)

9:57 *curse of Jotham.* See v. 20. (CSB)

Jotham’s curse was fulfilled about the people of Shechem just as it was about Abimelech. (TLSB)

9:22–57 The first attempt at kingship in Israel fails miserably, not because monarchy is an unacceptable form of government but because Abimelech is an unworthy candidate. How frequently rulers exploit people rather than seeing leadership as an opportunity for service! Luther once said that a wise prince was a rare bird; every form of government requires leaders of integrity. How different a leader is our Lord Jesus, who maintained His integrity. Rather than exploit us, He sacrificed Himself for us. • Lord God, ruler of the nations, bless our land with wise and godly leaders. Amen. (TLSB)