

The Broadmoor Bulletin

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Abimelech, Tola, and Jair

Abimelech: The Curse of Jotham

The story of Abimelech, a presumptuous judge and prince who ruled in Israel for three years, is a more significant story than the account of his relationship to the sons of Gideon and the people of Shechem over whom he reigned (Judges 9). It is a story about God and His rule in the affairs and lives of men, of His control over the natural world He created and over man whom He made in His own image. Even a heathen king many years later was cut down as a tree to a stump and made to eat grass in a field as an oxen until he understood “that the Most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever he will, and setteth up over it the lowest of men” (Dan 4:17, 25).

That truth is illustrated by Jotham, the lone surviving son of Gideon, who delivered from Mt. Gerizim the fable of the trees. The trees, according to the tale, searched for a king to rule over them and appealed to the olive tree, the fig tree, and the vine to exercise this authority. After each refused to leave its place and role in the realm of nature to become ruler, the trees then asked the bramble, a thorn bush, to reign over them. The bramble accepted with the empty promise of refuge in its shade and the threat of destruction by fire if they refused to anoint him (9:7-15).

The background to Jotham’s fable was the death of his sixty-nine brothers at the hands of Abimelech with the blessings of the men of Shechem. Abimelech, the son of Gideon by his concubine, challenged the men of Shechem to decide whether it is better for one man to rule over them or for all the seventy sons of Gideon by his many wives to be their king. When they selected the one, Abimelech assumed that role over them and hired worthless men who murdered the sons of Gideon, except Jotham who hid during the slaughter and was spared.

The story of Abimelech, which began with this event, is one of treachery and deceit, and a grasp for power. The story of the men of Shechem is one of weakness, cowardice, and complicity in strengthening the hand of Abimelech in the evil he wrought against the sons of Gideon (9:24), a faithful judge who brought rest to the land for forty years (8:28). Jotham concludes that if Abimelech and the men of Shechem have dealt uprightly in this matter, then they can rejoice, but if they haven’t, fire will come forth and devour them (9:16-21). Jotham’s promise and curse point to a Prince whose hand is in the affairs of the land of Israel and who rules over Abimelech and the men of Shechem.

This Prince, the God of Israel, sent an “evil spirit” between Abimelech and the men of Shechem and war ensued. Gaal, the son of Ebed, gained the trust of the men of Shechem and sought war against Abimelech. Abimelech summoned his men to war, ambushed Gaal and the men of Shechem, attacked their city, and prevailed in a defeat of the armies of Gaal, the people of Shechem, and the men who fled for safety in the city tower (9:22-40).

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Abimelech: Not a Judge—Not Quite a King

The story of Abimelech is a curious one when taken in line with the rest of the judges found in their eponymous book. Abimelech’s tale is one of ambition, murder, and self-destruction, not typical of the other judges’ stories that describe Israel falling out of favor with God into oppression, repenting, and being given deliverance from God. Abimelech is not even described as being a judge, but instead is someone who makes himself a king. So was Abimelech a judge? Was he even really a king?

Abimelech’s story takes up chapter nine of the Book of the Judges. The story follows up the account of Abimelech’s father, Gideon, who is one of the more renowned judges, whose seventy sons became rulers in his place after he died. However, Abimelech conspired with his kinsmen in Shechem to be the only one ruling over them, since he was the son of Gideon’s concubine from Shechem. With their consent, and with funding provided by a temple of Baal-Berith, Abimelech and his henchmen captured the rest of Gideon’s sons and executed them, except for Jotham, who escaped with his life. Abimelech then was crowned king by the peoples of Shechem and Beth Millo. While Abimelech was king, God allowed an insurgency to develop in his province, prompting Abimelech to massacre his own citizens and countrymen, and be killed in the process.

So how does Abimelech add up to the rest of the judges? He was not righteous in the cause of the Lord, nor was he a deliverer such as Othniel (Judges 3:9). Abimelech was cunning, but not a wise counselor such as Deborah (Judges 4:5). He did not meet with God, nor with His angels as Gideon had done (Judges 6:12). Nor did he receive the Spirit of the Lord, as even Jephthah had done (Judges 11:29). While these heroic judges were by no means perfect creatures, they did operate according to God’s judgment, and not their own, whereas Abimelech executed his own judgments, bringing destruction upon his own people. He was not with God in any of his actions, and neither was God with him. Therefore, though his record is contained in the Book of the Judges, he should not be mistaken for one of the judges.

Also, worth mentioning is the curse which Jotham made on Abimelech and Shechem in Judges 9:8-15. This curse begins with a parable, where the trees decide to appoint for themselves a king. The olive and fig trees decline to rule over the others, causing the trees to appoint the thorn bush as their king. This story is quite ironic, since the trees claim to have better things to do than rule over one another that they have to resort to a thorny shrub to be their king. The implications of this story are abundant. (Continued on page 2)

Abimelech: The Curse of Jotham

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Abimelech's insatiable thirst for power didn't end here; it drove him on northward from Shechem to the city of Thebez, where he encamped with his men of war and fought until the people were defeated. A few men and women took refuge in the city tower, where Abimelech's lust for power came to an abrupt end. A woman in the tower dropped a millstone on the king's head, crushing his skull and moving him to call for death by a sword at the hands of one of his loyal soldiers (9:50-54).

This brought to an end the unwarranted reign of Abimelech and the men who supported him in his evil deeds at Shechem. But what is the overarching theme of the account of this renegade judge? It is stated rather succinctly and plainly by the writer of the book: "Thus God requited the wickedness of Abimelech, which he did unto his father, in slaying his seventy brethren; and all the wickedness of the men of Shechem did God requite upon their heads: and upon them came *the curse of Jotham* the son of Jerubbaal (Gideon)" (Judges 9:56-57).

The word "requite" means essentially "to turn back" or "to return," a reference to the wickedness of Abimelech and the men of Shechem coming full circle to lodge with vengeance where it began—in their own hearts and lives. Vengeance belongs to the Lord and, as He says, He will repay men for their iniquity (Deut. 32:35). God is in control of both Israel and the nations, and here He displays His righteous indignation against those who seek to flaunt His righteous rule among men. Abimelech, an illegitimate judge, and the men of Shechem, who conspired to give legitimacy to his rule, were struck down by justice—a sure foundation stone in the throne of God (Psalm 89:14).

L. A. Stauffer

Abimelech: Not a Judge—Not Quite a King

(Continued from page 1)

First of all, the trees, which represent the people, realize that they would give up fruitful and honorable tasks to have to rule over others. Secondly, it demonstrates the poor choices that men make for themselves demonstrated by large, majestic trees submitting themselves to the brush, something so far beneath them, yet realized by their submission to Abimelech. Overall, the parable shows the futility of placing faith and glory in earthly kings, when God was already king.

Abimelech's story has a great significance in the history that the Book of the Judges records for us, connecting the legacy of one of the greatest judges and its downfall when the first human king reigned in Israel. The story highlights the destructive influences of human kingdoms and idolatry, and is a precursor to the selection of Saul in 1 Samuel 8 – 9, but perhaps more so to 1 Kings 12 when Jeroboam divided Israel and was crowned king of the northern tribes in the very same city of Shechem.

Dave Boyd

The hidden title for the puzzle is spelled out by the uncircled letters in the solved puzzle.

Puzzle 23

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Hidden Title: _____

Scripture: Judges 9:7-21

JOTHAM	HEARKEN	TREES
ANOINT	KING	OLIVE
FATNESS	PROMOTED	FIG
SWEETNESS	GOOD	FRUIT
VINE	BRAMBLE	REIGN

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S A M G I F P F F
A W N A B D R L E
O I E O H U O F T
K B K E I T M O F
R E R T T N O A G
E R A A E N T J S
V E E P M N E P G
I I H F E B D S U
L G N S T P L X S
O N S E E R T E M
    
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Tola and Jair

Tola and Jair were judges in Israel who followed Abimelech and apparently ruled with some success within the nation—Tola of Issachar in the hill country of Ephraim and Jair of Gilead in the territory of Gad. Tola judged Israel for 23 years and Jair for 22 years. No assessment is offered for either judge, but Jair and his 30 sons are portrayed as rather successful among the people of Gilead (10:1-5).

L. A. Stauffer

??Did You Know??

1. Abimelech was the son of Gideon (Jerubbaal), and he killed 69 of his 70 brothers (Judges 9:1, 5; 7:1)
2. A woman dropped a millstone on Abimelech's head, cracking his skull. However, he had his armor bearer kill him so that a woman would not be credited for his death (Judges 9:52 – 55).
3. Tola was from the tribe of Issachar, and he judged Israel 23 years (Judges 10:1 – 2).
4. Jair judged Israel 22 years. He had 30 sons who rode 30 donkeys and ruled 30 cities (Judges 10:3 – 4).