

Immediate Context

Gideon's choices after his victory over the Midianites set the stage for this horrific chapter in Israel's history. We see through this narrative an illustration of the importance of enduring in righteousness. Abimelech was the son born to Gideon (also known as Jerbbaal) from his Shechemite slave (concubine). This is in addition to the 70 sons bore to him through his numerous wives.

Judges 9:1-6 – Abimelech, Shechem, and the Betrayal

What do we know of Shechem?

- It was the first campsite of Abraham when he came to Canaan from Mesopotamia.
- Jacob owned land there and built an altar after returning safely from Laban (*Gen 33:18-20*).
- Shechem (son of Hazor) raped Jacob's daughter; Jacob's sons killed him and several other men of Shechem and pillaged their city.
- Shechem was in Ephraim's inheritance; it was a Levite city of refuge in the hill country.
- It was where Israel gathered separating on Mt. Gerizim and Mt. Ebal and pronounced the blessings and curses after entering the Promised Land.
- It was the site of Joshua's famous "choose this day" address; and all Israel made a covenant and established a memorial there.
- Joseph's bones were buried there.
- It appears to have remained a Canaanite city in the midst of Israel which was rescued from the Midianites by Gideon, just like the rest of Israel.

Why would Shechem be motivated to overthrow Gideon's sons? As a Canaanite city in the midst of Israel, they were a minority. This was their opportunity to assert dominance over the area and increase their wealth and power. This was their chance to make a name for themselves.

Whether or not Gideon ever "ruled" over Israel, what influence did his sons have over Israel? They were considered to be rulers, imposing enough power that some were motivated to overthrow them.

What is ironic about Abimelech's offer to the Shechemites in verse 2 and the Shechemite's logic for following Abimelech in verse 3? He was trying to convince them that he would be a better ruler over Shechem than Gideon's 70 sons because he was related to them. For Abimelech to become king, he would have to kill his relatives... his own brothers. This completely undermines the advantage of having a relative rule over you, when relation holds no value to the man.

Each of Gideon's brothers was valued at a piece of silver, the price of hiring sufficient men to capture and kill them all.

What type of overthrow do we see in verse 5? It appears that each of the brothers (save one) were rounded up and killed, execution-style, one at a time. It is likely this is close to the location where the Lord first appeared to Gideon while threshing wheat in a wine press.

What type of man did they just make king? They anointed a man who would murder his own brothers in an execution-style setting. This shouldn't be much comfort if you are making him king because he is family. He was no more related to the people of Shechem than he was to his half-brothers through Gideon.

Where is God in all of this? He has not yet been mentioned in this passage. In fact, He is scarcely mentioned in this whole chapter, yet He is not ignorant of the events and will direct the outcome.

Judges 9:7-21 – Jotham's Fable

Jotham escaped and climbed Mount Gerizim, adjacent to the City of Shechem, and was able to address the people from the top of the mountain. His speech was the proclamation and application of a fable, identifying their sins, and pronouncing a unique curse upon both the men of Shechem and Abimelech himself. Below is a picture of Mount Gerizim from the ruins of Shechem.



Was Jotham functioning as a prophet in this passage? It is hard to say. He had a good and honest assessment of the situation and issued a blessing and a curse based upon the behavior of the people. It is debatable whether he considered himself a prophet.

Why did the trees in Jotham's fable seek a ruler? That is really the question. Why did they want to install someone else as their ruler? There was no good reason. There is no indication of oppression by Gideon's sons.

Why did the olive and fig trees and the grape vines refuse to rule over the trees in Jotham's fable? They were too busy fulfilling their role and being a blessing.

What type of trees are the leaders of Shechem in this fable? They are called cedars of Lebanon, some of the finest and mightiest trees in the surrounding nations.

What is bramble? Brambles are an invasive species of buckthorn. It was a plant which doesn't contribute anything positive (like oil, figs, grapes, wood for fire or building, or even shade) to mankind. It is used as a negative illustration by Jesus in *Luke 6:44*.

How does the bramble regard the trees in *Judges 9:15*? The trees are regarded with suspicion and the bramble issues a cautionary curse upon them if their motives are not sincere. As the saying goes, "there is no honor among thieves." It is this sincerity that becomes the focus of the remainder of Jotham's speech.

Review excerpts from another major speech that took place in Shechem (see *Joshua 24:1, 14-15*). How does Jotham's proclamation parallel Joshua's? The similar theme is the call to act with integrity and truth. Jotham was holding up the deeds of Abimelech and the elders of Shechem to God's standards of integrity and truth. Rather than judging them per se, he establishes a standard of equity and declares that they should reap what they have sown, whether blessing or a curse. He pronounces blessing upon them if they have done this from integrity and sincerity and the curse of self-destructive fire if not.

The curse of Jotham can be simplified as, "may you reap what you have sown." (*Galatians 6:7-8*)

Truly, the natural cycle of sin results in destruction (*James 1:14-15*). Jotham's curse follows the principles of God's truth and only expands upon it by pronouncing the self-destructive nature of their demise within their lifetime. We also see an illustration of the concept that people tend to get the leaders that they deserve. **Self-determined leadership does not necessarily imply good leadership.**

Judges 9:22-25 – God Intervenes

Three years were allowed to pass: don't let God's patience make you doubt His faithfulness.

How did God send an "evil spirit" to Abimelech? How is this consistent with James 1:13-14? This is a difficult passage to explain, as there is more than one possible answer. First, an evil "spirit" doesn't necessarily imply a demon. It can mean a bad temper. Read *1 Samuel 16:14-16* for an analogous example. The wickedness was already inherent within the men of Shechem and Abimelech (as we saw earlier). The Lord just stepped back and allowed the wickedness within to be stirred up, perhaps without His hand of common grace or perhaps by allowing Satan or one of his emissaries to attack (e.g. Job or Paul).

Why did God "send" the evil spirit? God judged the murder of Gideon's sons to be a sin held to the accounts of Abimelech and the men of Shechem and He moved to allow the cycle of sin to come to fruition in their destruction.

Note that the Shechemites response to Abimelech was “treacherous” (to break faith), the opposite of integrity and truth.

Judges 9:26-41 – Abimelech’s Fire

What do we learn about Abimelech in this passage? He showed no mercy after defeating Gaal and those who fought with him. He came back the next day and ambushed the people of the city as they were out in their fields, tore down the city, sowed it with salt, and then burned 1,000 people alive in the tower of Shechem. He showed just as much love to his relatives in Shechem as he did to his brothers in Ophrah. This shouldn’t have been a surprise.



Above is the fortress temple at Shechem, with its white sacred pillar just left of the center. This is believed to be the house of Baal-berith destroyed by Abimelech, which was never rebuilt.

Judges 9:50-57 – Abimelech on Fire

Finally God’s judgment comes down upon the head of Abimelech, literally. He sought to do the same thing in Thebez (burn down the tower) that he did in Shechem, but was mortally wounded by a woman, who happened to have an upper millstone handy to drop on his head. In his disgrace, he asked his armor bearer to kill him so that he wouldn’t die by the hand of a woman.

Ultimately, these events were recognized to be the work of God, Who was slowly but surely bringing justice upon those who committed such great offences three years prior. God is not slack concerning His promise. He will bring justice upon the heads of those who do not repent and find shelter in Christ.