

A FOOLISH KING IN ISRAEL

Summary and Historical Background

Gideon's refusal to rule Israel as king (8:23) became the compelling desire of his son, Abimelech (9:6). Relying on his personal contacts and political intrigue, Abimelech became a king, but apparently ruled only over Shechem and its environs. His attempt to rule Israel was aborted basically by his sudden death at the hands of a woman. His death allowed judges to govern the affairs of Israel. Abimelech was followed by two minor judges, Tola and Jair (10:1-5), who the LORD used to bring peace to Israel. They may have judged in different parts of Israel at the same time. Very little is known about their ministry.

I. Pride of Abimelech — 9:1-6

9:1 — "Abimelech the son of Jerubbaal" - he was the son of Gideon (Jerubbaal) by a concubine in Shechem (cf. 8:29-31). Since a concubine was considered a second class wife, Abimelech may have suffered from Gideon's other seventy sons (8:30), being told that he was not as important as they were. Whatever the reasons, Abimelech was extremely proud and he had no love for Gideon's other sons.

9:2 — "That one reign over you" - Abimelech was referring to himself as the one that should reign over the Shechemites as their king. Gideon declined the offer of being king (8:22, 23), but Abimelech determined to be one.

9:3 — "Men of Shechem" - it literally is "lords of Shechem," the ruling class of men.

9:4 — "They gave him . . . silver out of the house of Baal-berith" - there was a highly developed worship of Baal at Shechem. This temple is clear evidence of that fact. There was only an altar at Ophrah, which Gideon was commanded to destroy. The temple at Shechem was only twelve miles north of Shiloh, the place of the Lord's Tabernacle. Money was taken from the treasury of this temple to finance Abimelech's wicked plan.

"Abimelech hired vain and light persons" — he determined to rid himself of all rivals to the throne by killing all seventy sons of Gideon and he hired these men, with "Baal's money" to help him. Abimelech was self-willed and proud (cf. Prov 12:15). He failed to choose God's will for his life (Prov 3:5, 6; Mt 6:33), but did that which was right in his own eyes (Prov 14:12; Jud 17:6; 21:25).

9:5 — "Upon one stone" - public execution of Gideon's sons may be meant by this phrase. If so, he must have convinced the people of Ophrah to do such an act. Maybe he appealed to the Baal sympathizers, who secretly resented Gideon's strong stand against Baal worship. After all, he had received money from the Baal temple in Shechem to do this evil work.

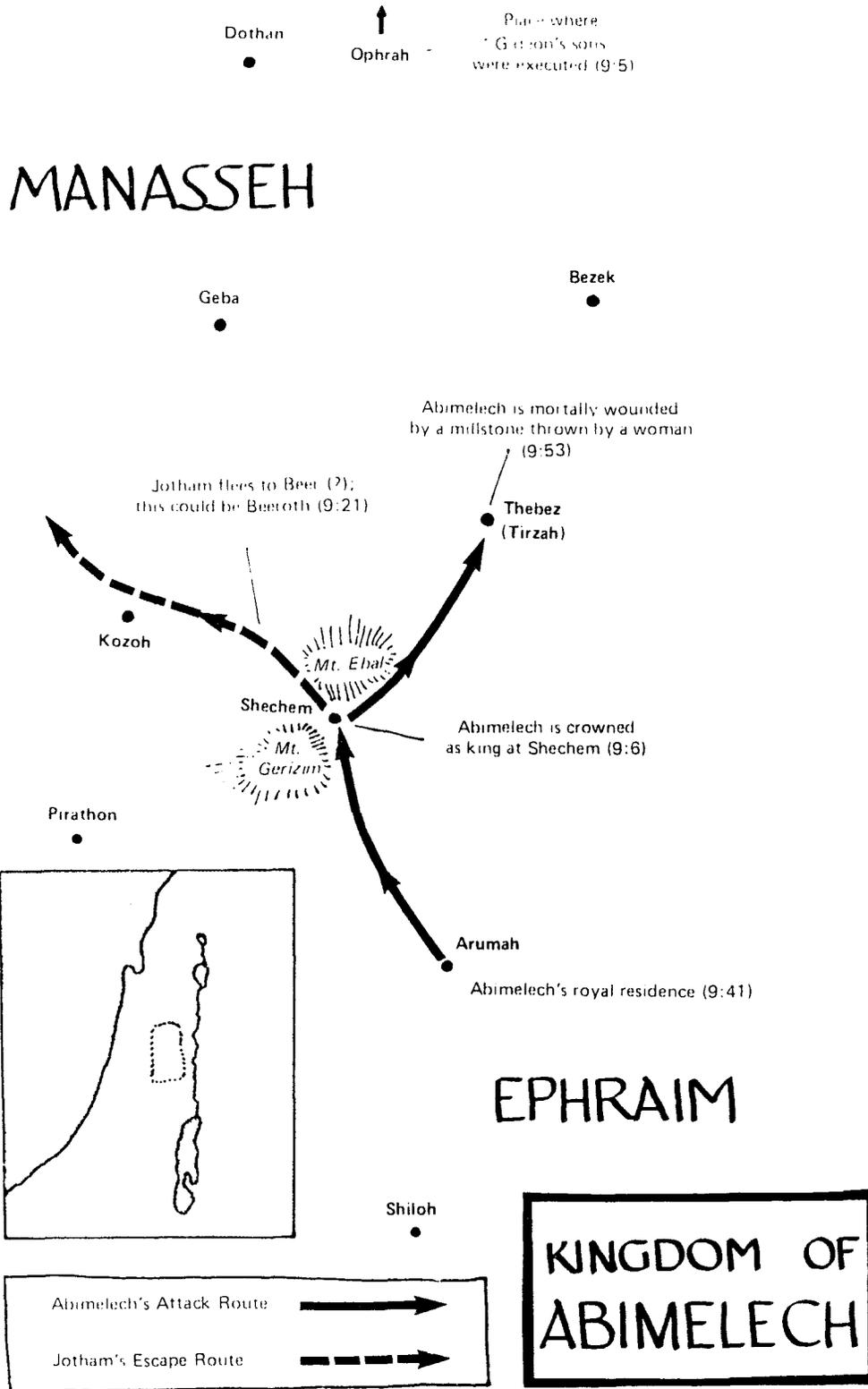
9:6 — "House of Millo" - this is the same place as the "tower of Shechem" (cf. 9:20, 47, 49). This building served as a temple as well as a fortress.

Archaeologists possibly have uncovered this structure (80 X 65 ft.). It has thick walls and an entrance with towers on either side.

"Made Abimelech king" — he was crowned as king only by Shechem. He had grander plans, but they never developed to any large degree.

II. Prophecy of Jotham — 9:7-21

9:7 "Jotham" — he was the youngest of Gideon's seventy sons and somehow he managed to escape the mass execution of his brothers by Abimelech (9:5).



"Top of mount Gerizim" — this mountain and mount Ebal are next to each other with Shechem in the valley between them. Mount Gerizim was located to the south of the city. Jotham stood on one of the lower ridges on this mount and spoke his parable to the people of Shechem when they crowned Abimelech as their king. After his message he fled for fear of Abimelech (9:21).

9:8 — Jotham's parable of the trees is the first parable in the Bible. He demonstrated a fine literary skill in this message to the Shechemites.

9:9-14 — the olive, fig and vine are the three main fruit producing plants in Israel, but the bramble is barely good enough for fuel.

9:15 — "Put your trust in my shadow . . . let fire come out of the bramble" - the bramble has no shadow to speak of; it is only a lowly bush. Its only use is to fuel small cooking fires, but as such it can start larger fires. Abimelech was like the bramble. He could not help the men of Shechem, but he could hurt them. He could not defend them, but he certainly could destroy them.

9:16-20 — Jotham explained the meaning of the parable and applied it. Sarcasm shows through it in 9:16, 19. He reminds these men of Gideon's goodness to them (9:17) and their shameful act by killing his sons (9:18). He concludes by pronouncing a curse upon Abimelech and upon Shechem, which predicted they would devour each other.

III. Perversion of Abimelech — 9:22-57

9:22 — "Reigned three years over Israel" - it should not be supposed that Abimelech reigned over all Israel, but just those Israelites in and around Shechem. It was only a short time before trouble broke out in open hostility between Abimelech and Shechem.

9:23 — "An evil spirit" - a demon was allowed to destroy the relationship between Abimelech and the Shechemites (cf. 1 Sam 16:14).

9:24 — "The cruelty" - the sin done by Abimelech and Shechem in killing Gideon's sons was about to bear its fruit (cf. Gal 6:7).

9:25 — "Liers in wait for him" - evidently the men of Shechem tired of Abimelech's lack of help, so they took matters into their own hands and helped themselves. Since he did not even live in their city, but in Arumah (9:41), a town five miles southeast of Shechem, the men of Shechem appointed men to rob those who were bringing supplies to their king.

9:26 — "Gaal . . . came with his brethren" - he was probably a wandering knight with a band of fighters, looking for some adventure.

"The men of Shechem put their confidence in him" — Gaal secretly was given a place of leadership in Shechem, but Zebul was the ruler that Abimelech had placed over the city (9:30).

9:27 — "House of their god" - three clear references to this Baal temple are given in this chapter (also in 9:4, 46).

"Cursed Abimelech" — under the influence of alcohol, the tongues of Gaal and the leaders of Shechem were loosened to speak the feelings of their hearts.

9:28 — "Serve the men of Hamor the father of Shechem" - Gaal was suggesting that the men of Shechem throw off the reign of Abimelech and return to the ancient form of government practiced by Hamor, the founder of the city (Gen 34:2, 6).

9:30-33 — When Zebul heard about the words of Gaal, he was angry and sent a message to Abimelech in Arumah to act quickly and take control of the city at once.

9:31 — "Sent messengers unto Abimelech privily" - Zebul did not want Gaal to know that he was alerting Abimelech of his work with the Shechemite leaders to throw off his rule over them, so he sent messengers to Abimelech secretly.

9:34-41 — Zebul and Gaal were up early in the morning, standing at the gate of Shechem, when Gaal saw the army of Abimelech coming down from the mountain. Zebul cleverly discounted what Gaal saw, saying they were mere shadows on the mountain, until Abimelech got close enough to get within striking distance. Then Zebul challenged Gaal to use his sword, as he had used his mouth, to fight against Abimelech. Foolishly, Gaal accepted the challenge and was severely beaten by Abimelech. This discredited Gaal with the men of Shechem so that they did not dare to give him refuge in their city. Zebul cast him and his men out of Shechem and the people thought that Abimelech would be satisfied.

9:42-45 — Abimelech was not satisfied. The next day when the people left their walled city to work in the fields, Abimelech attacked with three companies of soldiers. One company rushed the city and controlled its entrance while the other two killed all the people in the fields. Then he fought against the city all that day and completely destroyed it. He killed the common people and beat down the city. It remained in ruins until Jeroboam rebuilt it (1 Kings 12:25).

9:46-49 — The aristocrats of the city had fled to the tower (fortress) of Shechem for safety, but when they heard what Abimelech had done to the city, they went into the very house of their god (apparently located inside the fortress) to seek his protection. Of course, there was no protection for them from Baal and Abimelech succeeded in burning them to death by building a huge fire around the fortress. A thousand men and women died; these were the very ones who aided Abimelech in killing Gideon's sons and had made him their king.

9:50 — "Then went Abimelech to Thebez" - this city is now identified as Tirzah, about six miles northeast of Shechem. Evidently they also had offended Abimelech and he took the city easily.

9:51 — "A strong tower" - Thebez also had a strong fortress within the city, but in this city all the people crowded into it, not only the aristocrats of the city.

9:52 — "To burn it with fire" - Abimelech used the same approach in destroying the people in this tower as he had used at Shechem. When the wood was in place he personally proceeded to light the fire.

9:53 — "A piece of a millstone" - this was the upper part of the millstone which probably was about a foot long and weighed five pounds or more. A woman threw this part of the millstone at him and it hit him in the head while he was trying to light the wood piled around the tower.

9:54 — "A woman slew him" - he did not die immediately, but death was imminent, and so he asked his armor bearer to kill him. He did not want it said that a woman had killed him. That would be a deep disgrace (cf. 4:21, 22).

9:55 — Abimelech's death ended the hostilities.

9:56- 57 — the curse of Jotham had come upon both the Shechemites and Abimelech.

IV. Problem of Israel — 10:1-18

10:1 — "There arose to defend Israel Tola" - evidently this judge defended Israel from further disintegration caused by the poor rule of Abimelech.

"Dwelt in. . .mount Ephraim" — this was basically the same area where Abimelech had ruled.

10:2 — "He judged Israel" - the LORD was gracious to give Israel a good judge for 23 years to straighten out the problems caused by the wicked king that they had chosen.

10:3-5 — Jair judged Israel for 22 years most likely in Gilead on the east side of the Jordan River.

10:6 — "Israel did evil again" - this is the most complete list of Israel's idolatry. When Israel sinned against the LORD, He could not bless them. So Israel turned from their true God and sought blessings from their neighbor's false gods. When this happened, the LORD was angry and let them fall under the power of their neighbors so that they became their slaves. The only recourse Israel had was to repent, but this they were slow to do.

10:7 — "Sold them into the hands of the Philistines" - this seems to be a reference to the forty years that the Philistines controlled Israel on their western side (cf. 13:1).

"And into the hands of the children of Ammon" — this refers to the eighteen years that the Ammonites controlled Israel on their eastern side (10:8, 9).

10:10-14 — "Israel cried unto the Lord" - the Israelites prayed for the LORD to deliver them, but He rejected their cry and told them to pray to their other gods for help. He knew that they were not truly sincere in their repentance.

10:15-16 — When Israel admitted its sin and would to do whatever the LORD told them, putting away its idols and giving sole service to the LORD, He was moved with compassion to help them.