

The story of Abimelech – Gideon’s legacy

• *Seventy kings or one? Abimelech promotes his ambition*

• *Abimelech chosen*

• *Ruthless destruction of rivals – but with one exception*

• *Jotham’s escape*

• *Jotham’s parable – the wicked thorn bush – worthless Abimelech*

• *A bleak and dismal future*

• *Jotham runs for his life*

Judges 9 is about Abimelech, but it is really continuing the story of Gideon. These famous heroes of faith in the Book of Judges are, as we have seen, very weak and fallible people. Gideon made some bad mistakes in the later stage of his life, and his blunders continued to have consequences in the next generation. We have already been told of Gideon’s concubine who gave birth to Abimelech ¹.

The sons of Gideon were acting as if they were a tribe of kings! This made it possible for a man like Abimelech to promote his own ambitions. Abimelech goes to the family of his father’s concubine and gets them to put a suggestion to the people of Shechem. Would they rather be ruled by seventy sons of Gideon or have one them – Abimelech! – to be a king ¹? Gideon’s sons are not popular. They are now all acting like kings. Gideon’s example is followed by all seventy of his sons!

The citizens of Shechem chose to have Abimelech as their leader ¹. They provided him with money ² and with his new wealth Abimelech persuaded a gang of unscrupulous delinquents to become his private army ³. He goes to Ophrah, the home-town of Gideon and the centre of the idolatry which had arisen because of Gideon’s ephod ⁴. There, seeking to destroy any possible rivals, he murdered all except one of his half-brothers ⁵. After he thought all rivals were out of the way, the people of Shechem arranged for his coronation ⁶.

But one half-brother had escaped! Jotham climbs partway up the 700 metre slope of Mount Gerizim. It is an area with unusual acoustical characteristics and had a natural platform overlooking the town of Shechem. Jotham began to shout a message; his voice sounded down the slopes of hillside. He probably shouted out who he was and people began to gather to listen to what he was saying ¹. He tells the people a parable which hints at the worthlessness of Abimelech. The trees want a king. They invite the olive tree ², the fig-tree ³ and the vine ⁴; but each of them turn down the offer of kingship. Then the trees invite the thorn-bush to be their king ⁵. The olive-tree, the fig-tree and the vine are reluctant to give up their good work (providing oil, fruit and wine). On the other hand the thorn-bush is virtually useless! Only trees which are desperate or simple-minded would look for a leader in a thorn-bush!

‘If you really want to anoint me king...’, says the thorn-bush. He knows that the trees would only turn to a thorn-bush if they were desperate! If they want such a worthless tree, the tree is willing! But on the other hand if they reject the thorn-tree, the worthless thorn-tree will then become angry and destroy even the mighty and impressive cedars of Lebanon ¹. Now the trees have put their request to the thorn-tree, their future is a bleak and dismal one whether their request goes forward or not!

Jotham applies the parable to the people’s choice of Abimelech. If they have done well in showing such ingratitude to the line of Gideon – all well and good ¹. May they and Abimelech bring joy to each other! Like the thorn-tree Abimelech was the most worthless figure they could possibly have chosen for the task, but now they have chosen him they are in trouble. They have got a king who will cut and wound them. If they have been so unrighteous and cruel as to show such ingratitude towards Gideon (as they obviously have!), then may fiery destruction exterminate both them and their king ²! At that point Jotham runs for his life and goes to stay in a town called Beer. He lives there with an uneasy anxiety about what vengeance Abimelech might arrange for him ³.

¹ see 8:31

¹ 9:1-2

¹ 9:3

² 9:4

³ 9:4

⁴ 8:27

⁵ 9:5

⁶ 9:6

¹ 9:7

² 9:8-9

³ 9:10-11

⁴ 9:12-13

⁵ 9:14

¹ 9:15

¹ 9:16-19

² 9:20

³ 9:21

1. Challenges to responsibility must be taken seriously

- A missed opportunity

1. Challenges to responsibility must be taken seriously. The story of Abimelech throws light on Gideon's refusal to become king. Gideon might have arranged for an orderly line of kings. He might have trained one of his sons to be a righteous king over Israel. But enjoying an unofficial kingship, kingship without being king, he had the privileges of kingship but none of its responsibilities. He took no steps to secure the future. No doubt securing the future is not completely possible but Gideon did not make even the feeblest attempts to secure righteousness in the nation after his own lifetime. The result is that Gideon left a power-vacuum after his death, and one of the worst of his sons has stepped into the gap. But the blame must largely go to Gideon. He took no responsibility for Israel's future. Now one of his own offspring is bringing ruination to the land.

The lesson for us is: challenges to responsibility must be taken seriously. The offer of kingship that came to Gideon was the chance of a lifetime to achieve some good in Israel, in one way or another, but Gideon missed the opportunity.

2. The neglect of the true leadership will lead to the rise of the unworthy leadership

2. The neglect of the true leadership will lead to the rise of the unworthy leadership. Gideon took no steps to secure a good future for the land of Israel. His sons were living like kings and there was dissatisfaction among the people. The question 'Do you want to be ruled by the seventy sons of Gideon?' had an obvious answer. 'No, we are not getting much blessing from these sons of Gideon'. There was an obvious gap in leadership, and where there is a gap in leadership, an unworthy person will arise to fill it.

Leaders have to be men and women of sincerity, ability, generosity. They have to have the needs of the people at heart. Where such leaders are missing, false teachers will arise. If Gideons are missing, Abimelechs will step in.

3. There are times when one must boldly prepare for the future

- A prophetic word
- Waiting for a fresh opportunity - looking to God to act

3. There are times when one must boldly prepare for the future. There was not much that this youngest son, Jotham, could do. He genuinely had the needs of the people on his heart. He could not remove Abimelech, but he could speak out, saying what needed to be said and announcing what inevitably would happen. The people's decision was like the choice of a thorn-bush. Abimelech's reign could do no good.

The sooner that was realised, the better. Jotham could at least speak a word which prepared the way for the future. It was an occasion when one needed to speak out the truth and then wait for a fresh opportunity. Abimelech's reign had to come to an end before Israel would have another chance of good leadership. All Jotham could do was boldly give a prophetic word and then run for his life. But it was a prophetic word that would be fulfilled. Sometimes a situation is so bad all one can do is prepare for the future, and look for God to act.



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