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The Conspiracy of Abimelech

8:33 to 9:6

The conspiracy of Abimelech DIG: Who was Abimelech? Who were his parents? Why did he go to Shechem? What did Abimelech do in order to become king? Why did Isra'el “forget” what Gideon and ADONAI had done? What was the substitute? What kind of a person would abandon their birth name and then name themselves? How would you describe Abimelech's character? Who was Abimelech loyal to? Why did his brothers and the citizens of Shechem follow him?

REFLECT: Gideon's people soon forgot about ADONAI. What can you do to help ensure that doesn't happen to you? Who is God calling you to express kindness to this week? How will you? Why is it important that you don't hang out with vain and reckless people? What do you hope your legacy will be after you die? Do you keep your obligations? How are truth and integrity displayed in your life?

His rule was secured by guile, maintained by force, and did not survive his death.

He was never a judge, much less a king.

It's All in the Name (8:33-35): As Michael Hattin relates in his commentary on *Judges*, as a man of resolve, ruthless **Abimelech** must have had **his** eye on **the kingship** from the very day **the Israelites** had first raised the subject. It is reasonable to assume that at the time of **Gideon's** great victory over **the Midianites** (**to see link click [Bd - Gideon's Victory Over the Midianites](#)**), **Abimelech** was either not born yet or else very young, for at the killing of **the Midianite kings Zebah and Zalmunna** in the aftermath of the victory, **Gideon's firstborn son Jether** was described as being **only a boy (8:20)**. No doubt, however, **the son of the concubine** grew up with the stories of **his father's** great victory and the reports of **his father's** refusal to become **king of Isra'el**. However, **Abimelech** was made of more brutal stuff than **his father**. It is more likely that **his** pretentious name, which means *my father is king*, was not given to **him** by **his**

father at all, but rather **it** was self-appointed! A careful reading of the relevant verse implies as much, for it says: **He [Gideon's] concubine who was in Shechem also bore him a son, and he made his name Abimelech (8:31 Hebrew).**

Generally in the TaNaKh, when names are given to children by their parents, the verb *vayikra* (*he called*) is used, or *vatikra* (*she called*) if the mother gives it. The verb *kara* means *to call* and its usage in biblical Hebrew is quite similar to its usage in English – it frequently means to address another, and it can sometimes mean to assign a name. But here, the account does not say *vayikra shmo Abimelech*, but *vayasem et shmo Abimelech*, which translates literally as **and he made his name Abimelech**. The subject of the pronoun **he** in **8:31** may not be **the father Gideon** at all but rather **Abimelech himself**, and indicates that at some point the ambitious **man** renounced **his** birth name and instead adopted a name that was more in keeping with **his** future ambitions. Instead of reading the verse: **and he [Gideon] made his name Abimelech**, we may just as reliably read it as: **and he [Abimelech] made his [own] name Abimelech! Gideon** refused to become **king** over **his people**, but **Abimelech** rode on **his father's** coattails in order to advance **his** own illegitimate and immoral claim. *My father is king*, essentially implies that *I will succeed my glorious father as king in his stead.*²¹²

Gideon died when he was very old, and he was buried in the grave of his father, Joash, at Ophrah in the land of the clan of Abiezer. No sooner had Gideon died than the Israelites again committed spiritual adultery with the Ba'al's, making Ba'al their god (8:32-33 Hebrew). The death of a judge once more led to the removal of restraint and a movement towards the **Ba'al** worship of **their** neighbors. So not surprisingly, as soon as **Gideon died**, all restraint was cast to the wind, and **the nation** rushed headlong into apostasy. The particular apostasy was **Ba'al** worship, specifically **Ba'al-Berith (9:46)**, or *lord of the covenant*, which flourished in **Shechem**. **Their** true covenant was with **YHVH** but **they** were giving up all pretense of being faithful to **Him**.

Shechem was in the **Israelite** heartland, about 31 miles (50 kilometers) north of **Jerusalem** and 15.5 miles (25 kilometers) west of **the Jordan River**. On a positive note, it was there that **Abraham** had first **built an altar** to **ADONAI** after arriving in **Canaan (Genesis 12:6)**. There, too, **Joshua** had called all **the tribes** together for a great covenant renewal ceremony after the completion of **his** campaigns of conquest (**Joshua 24:1**). But on the dark side of **their** history, **Simeon and Levi** **slaughtered all the men of Shechem** because of the rape of **their** sister **Dinah**

by **Shechem**, the clueless **son the mayor Hamor** (see the commentary on **Genesis [1e](#) - The Slaughter at Shechem by Simeon and Levi**).

The Israelites forgot ADONAI their God, who had rescued them from all their enemies surrounding them (8:34 Hebrew). YHVH and His mighty works were forgotten. He might be useful for a time of crisis, but the fertility gods appeared to offer more for **their** everyday existence. **Shechem** lay at the southern end of **the valley** separating **Gerizim** and **Ebal, the mountains of blessing and a curse** respectively (**Deuteronomy [Cq](#) - A Blessing and a Curse**). Therefore, it was a place of great symbolic importance. It was also significant in our present story from the fact that **Gideon** had **a concubine** there, and that **Abimelech** was **his son by her (8:31)**.

Less surprising was the failure of **the Israelites** to remember **Gideon**. **They also failed to show any kindness** (Hebrew: *chesed*, meaning *faithfulness or loyalty*) **to the family of Jerub-Ba'al in spite of all the good he had done for Isra'el (8:35 Hebrew)**. Many years had passed since **his** accomplishments, but the opulence of **his** family life may have aroused jealousy in the new generation, and the feeling might have been that **he** had already been sufficiently rewarded.²¹³ Here, **Gideon** is ironically called **Jerub-Ba'al, the Ba'al Fighter**, while **his son** goes back to the worship of **Ba'al**.

Gideon was from **the tribe of Manasseh (6:15)**, but **Shechem** was a **city in Ephraim (Joshua 20:7 and 21:21)**. We can only speculate why **Gideon** had **a concubine** there. Was it an attempt to heal the tense relationship between **himself** and **the Ephraimites** that had flared up (see **[Be - Gideon's Problem with Ephraim](#)**)? Or, to put the same issue more positively, was it a king-like political liaison intended to symbolically unite the two largest **northern tribes** under **his** authority as the new national leader? But why then **a concubine** rather than one of **his many wives (8:30)**? Or was it simply lust which **he** chose not to dignify with a marriage as a snub to **the Ephraimites** in retaliation for the problems **they** had given **him**? We don't know. But what we *do* know is that it caused trouble . . . big trouble.²¹⁴

The conspiracy of Abimelech (9:1-6): The sequel to the **Gideon** narrative is set in motion when **Abimelech** went to **Shechem** to speak to **his mother's brothers and all his mother's clan**. He said to them, **"Ask all the rulers of Shechem,"** literally **the ba'al's of Shechem**, its original meaning is *lord* or *owner*, as in **Joshua 24:11; Judges 20:5; First Samuel 23:11-12; Second**

Samuel 21:12.²¹⁵ **Abimelech's** evil thought was this: **Which is better for you: to have all seventy of Jerub-Ba'al's [Gideon's] sons rule over you, or just one man (9:1-2a NIV).**? In other words, **one ruler** is better than **seventy rulers**. However, there was no indication that any of the other **sons** had any such ambition. Thus far in the book of **Judges**, no **judge** was succeeded by **a son**. Through the whole course of **his** disastrous kingship, **Abimelech** sought to influence **the rulers of Shechem** through **his relatives**. **His** message to **them** was that a power struggle was under way and **they** were going to have to choose between **him** and the other **seventy sons of Jerub-Ba'al (8:30)**.

Abimelech said: **remember, I am your flesh and blood" (9:2b NIV).**

Abimelech will not speak again in the story until almost the very end (**9:48** and **54**). In all of **his** speeches, **he** commands others to take pains on **his** behalf. The first (**9:2b**) and the last (**9:54**) reveal **Abimelech's** preoccupation with **himself** and **his** image. **His** argument was couched in a society where the cohesive power of faithfulness to **YHWH** and **His** covenant was declining; and tribalism, in the worst sense, was again on the rise. And the Canaanite **blood**-tie was the most convincing argument, indeed, **Abimelech** would act more like a Canaanite than **a Jew**.²¹⁶

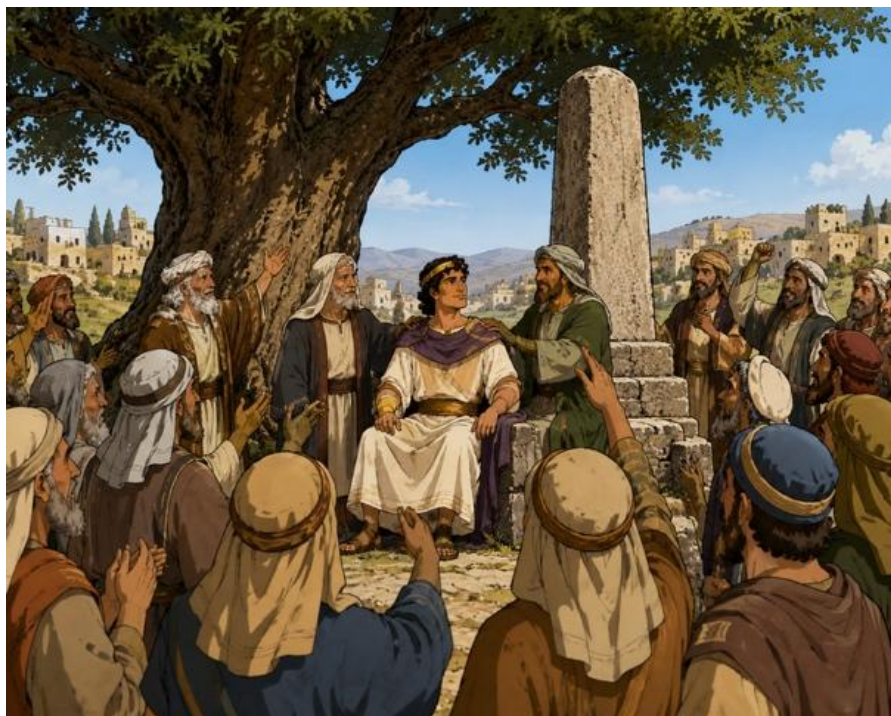
Abimelech's brothers did not hesitate; **they** immediately pledged **their** support to **him**, and **the rulers of Shechem** followed suit. **When the brothers repeated all this to the rulers of Shechem, they were inclined to follow Abimelech, for they said: He is related to us (9:3).** If there was going to be a power struggle, **they** would stand with **Abimelech**.²¹⁷

The rulers of Shechem immediately put **their** money where **their** mouth was by giving **Abimelech seventy shekels of silver from the temple of Ba'al-Berith (9:4a NLT)**. So the funds came out of **a temple** dedicated to **Ba'al**. This was not a large amount, but it corresponded exactly to the **seventy brothers** that **he** would **execute**. Effectively, **he** murdered each one of **his brothers** in cold **blood** for the measly pittance of a single shekel! **Abimelech's** disdain for the value of a human life and fraternal blood, already demonstrated at the very outset of **his** rule, will color the rest of **his** vicious career.²¹⁸ **Judas** betrayed **his Master** for **thirty pieces of silver** (see the commentary on [The Life of Christ Kc - Judas Agrees to Betray Jesus](#)); and this "Judas," **Abimelech**, betrayed **his brothers** in the same manner, including death.

And Abimelech used the silver to hire vain (Hebrew: *reikim*) **and reckless** (Hebrew: *ufochazim*) **troublemakers who agreed to follow him (9:4b**

Hebrew). Two descriptions are used to describe **the** hired **men**. The first one is **vain**. The Hebrew word means *empty*, and denotes **men** with idle hands and empty stomachs, but with no desire to work or earn an honest living. These **men** were willing to sell **themselves** for any task. The second word used to describe these **men** is **reckless**, the type of **men** who followed **Abimelech** were idle and **reckless**, a bad combination indeed, devoid of any wisdom or moral understanding.

Abimelech traveled thirty miles with **his troublemakers and went to his father's home at Ophrah, and once there, on one stone, they killed [sixty-nine] of the sons of Gideon (9:5a NLT)**. The fact that **they** were **killed on one stone** would have required **the killing** to take place one at a time. This was not a quick slaughter of unsuspecting victims, but a calculated, brutal, act of **murder** (see the commentary on **Deuteronomy Bq - Do Not Murder**) trying to promote terror. **The stone** may be a reference to a sacrificial **stone**, as in **First Samuel 14:33-35**, and if so, would allow for the easy disposal of **blood**, since the matter of the disposal of **blood** was of great consequence (see **Deuteronomy Cu - Do Not Eat the Blood**). In this ritual slaughter of **his half-brothers**, **he** may have been seeking to avoid any adverse consequences by carefully disposing of **the blood**.²¹⁹ **However, when the blood is shed upon stone, and not on the earth which can absorb it (Ezeki'el 24:7ff), it is an indication that the murderer is completely reckless and without thought of Ha'Shem who avenges the crime.** By **murdering his half-brothers**, **Abimelech** joined the ranks of other men in the Bible who committed fratricide, including **Cain (Genesis 4)**, **Absalom (Second Samuel 13:23ff)**, and **Jehoram (Second Chronicles 21:4)**. Not very nice company. **But** there was one problem, **the youngest brother, Jotham** (see **Bj - The Parable of Jotham**), **escaped and hid (9:5b NLT)**.



The **bloody** deed

accomplished: **Then all the leading citizens of Shechem and Beth-Millo gathered beside the great oak tree at the pillar of Shechem (Joshua 24:26) to crown Abimelech king (9:6 NIV).** Now the temple at Shechem became an idolatrous place, representing **Ba'al** in a Canaanite-cult installation. **The oak tree** was sacred in **the temple of Ba'al-Berith**. **Abimelech's** "coronation" was a farce, an empty ritual that was never accepted or blessed by **ADONAI**. The new "**king**" was just a selfish, godless man. **He** not only blasphemed **God** by the promises **he** made, but **he** defiled a place sacred in Jewish history.²²⁰ **Abimelech's** kingdom, however, would be limited to four cities: **Shechem, Beth-Milo, Arumah, and Thebez**. **His** three-year rule was secured by guile, maintained by force, and did not survive **his** death. **He** was never a **judge**, much less a **king**.²²¹

*Dear heavenly **Father**, praise **You** for **Your** witness in **Your Word**. For all scripture is inspired by **You** and is useful to teach me what is true and make me realize what is wrong in my life. It corrects me when I am wrong and teaches me to do what is right (Second Timothy 3:16). After **Gideon** died, the Israelites forgot **You**, who had rescued them from all their enemies. Lord, I don't ever want to forget about **You**. **You** have promised **never to leave me or abandon me (Hebrews 13:5)**, **You** are so steadfast and I am so fickle. But **You** know my heart. In **Messiah Yeshua's** holy **Name** and power of **His** resurrection. Amen*