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Abimelech Destroys Shechem
9: 42-49

Abimelech destroys Shechem DIG: How is Ga'al's character displayed here? What, or who, would possess a man to kill unarmed people? How was the curse of Jotham literally fulfilled? Why the salt? ADONAI's Name is never mentioned in connection with Abimelech? Why? How did he act like a thornbush?

REFLECT: Abimelech was out for revenge. What does B'rit Chadashah have to say to us about revenge? Was Abimelech paranoid? Abimelech ended up hating the city and the people that appointed him as their king. How did (does) that happen? Was evil ever really in control? Why? Why not? Memorize Romans 12:19.

For the Shechemites there would be no blessing, only a curse; no Gerizim, only Ebal.

With the defeat of **Ga'al** (**to see link click BI – The Conspiracy of Ga'al**), another problem remained for **Abimelech**, that of addressing the rebellion of **the men of Shechem**. **He** was well aware that **Ga'al** was merely a symptom of a deeper problem. **The leaders** of **Shechem** had been acting **treacherously** toward **him (9:23-25)**. Although **Zebul's** action had temporarily brought the situation under control, **Abimelech** was determined to teach **the rebels** in **Shechem** a lesson **they** would not forget. It seems that what transpired was an act of **revenge** against **those** who had questioned **his** leadership.

Later, in the B'rit Chadashah, **Paul** denounces returning **evil for evil**, declaring: **Never seek revenge, my friends; instead, leave that to God's anger.** If a wrong has been done to us, no matter how serious and harmful it may have been, we never have the right to render punishment for the offense ourselves. We are to leave that to **God's anger**. Quoting from **Deuteronomy 32:35, Paul** reminds us that **in the Tanakh it is written, "ADONAI** says: **Vengeance is my responsibility . . . I will repay (Romans 12:19; Second Samuel 22:48;**

Nahum 1:2; Hebrews 10:30). In **His** divine time, **God's anger is coming on those who disobey Him (Colossians 3:6).**

Day Three: Abimelech destroys Shechem: With the crisis apparently over, **the next day the people of Shechem went out into the fields to work** as usual**.** It was a natural and harmless thing to do, and an indication that **they** were tired of war and eager to resume **their** normal way of life. **Abimelech** and **his** supporters, however, saw it quite differently. The last time **the Shechemites went out into the fields,** it was to conspire with **Ga'al** against **Abimelech (9:27a)**, and the closing statement of **9:42** indicates that some loyal to **the king** suspected that mischief was afoot again and it was reported to **Abimelech**.

In this second campaign, **Abimelech** used the same strategy that **he** used so successfully in the first engagement: **ambush** and encirclement **(9:34-40)**. But now **he** neither receives nor needs any advice from **Zebul**, and this time victory comes even more easily because the victims were unsuspecting and presumably unarmed. Once again, it was no contest. **Abimelech divided his men into three groups** this time **and set an ambush. When he saw the people coming out of the city, he rose and attacked them. Abimelech,** personally leading **his men, stormed the city gate to keep the men of Shechem from getting back in, while Abimelech's other two groups cut them down in the fields.** Then all three companies moved into the city, systematically killing its inhabitants (taking **all day** to do it) **before Abimelech finally captured the city. He killed all the people and leveled the city (9:42-45a NLT).** The operation, from beginning to end, was carried out with ruthless efficiency. It is reminiscent, in many of its details, of the campaign against **Ai** in the time of **Joshua** (see the commentary on **Joshua Bg – The Destruction of Ai**), but now it is **Shechem** against **Shechem**, **clan** against **clan**, and **brother** against **brother** – a jagged tear in the very heart of **Isra'el**.

Then **Abimelech scattered salt all over the city (9:45b NLT)**, an act unparalleled in the TaNaKh. **Salty ground** was a symbol of **a barren desert (Deuteronomy 29:33; Job 39:6; Jeremiah 17:6; Psalm 107:34)**. This was a symbolic act that **the city** was to be turned forever into a barren **salt** desert. That didn't happen, but this was **Abimelech's** desire for **the city** in light of **their rebellion**. It showed **his** hatred for **the place** and everything associated with **it**. But as we are about to see, even this didn't satisfy **his** blood thirst.[248]

As typical in a siege of the ancient Near Eastern city, the commoners were the first

to face defeat, while the elite were able to find safety within a stronghold at the center of the city, here attached to **the temple** of **their** pagan god. When **the leading citizens heard** of **Ga'al's** defeat **they entered the inner chamber of the temple of Ba'al-Berith. Someone reported to Abimelech that the citizens had gathered in the temple (9:46-47 Hebrew).** In what follows, **he** acted as **his father Gideon** had done, but with even more brutality (see **Bf – The Final Defeat of the Midianites: The Punishment of Succoth and Pen'el**) With **his** enemy trapped, **Abimelech** decided to kill **them** all by setting **fire** to the **temple**.[249]

So **he and all his men went up to Mount Zalmon.** The word **Zalmon** is related to the word **"shadow."** Hence, **Mount Zalmon** is **"Shadowy/Dark Mountain."** It is not to be confused with the **Zalmon** of **Psalm 68:14**, which (as the context shows here) is in the region of Bashan, northeast of the Sea of Galilee. **The mountain** in view here must be close to **Shechem**. But since no mountain by that name is known in that area, it's likely that it is an alternative name for either **Mount Gerizim** or **Mount Ebal**, the two mountains near **Shechem** where **the covenant blessings and curses** had been pronounced in the time of **Joshua** (see **Joshua Bh – The Covenant at Mount Ebal**). Ironically, **Jotham** had stood on **Mount Gerizim**, **the mountain of blessing**, to **curse the Shechemites** for **making Abimelech their king**. The message was clear. For **them** there would be no **blessing**, only **a curse**; no **Gerizim**, only **Ebal**. So it really didn't matter which of the two was called **"Dark Mountain"** here; the appropriateness of the name derives from what **Abimelech** was about to do on it. The sun had set on **Shechem**; all that remained was darkness. When **they** got there, **Abimelech took an ax and cut off some branches, which he lifted to his shoulders. He ordered the men with him, "Quick! Do what you see me do" (9:48 NLT).**[250]

Sometimes it may appear as though **evil** is in control and that **ADONAI** has taken a vacation. Injustice dominates and wicked people, morally empty and reckless like **Abimelech**, seem to prevail **(Psalm 37** and **73)**. Anyone living in **Isra'el** at that time must have felt that way. Certainly many believers living in Nazi Germany in the 1930's and 40's felt that way, as does anyone living in a totalitarian state. When believers forget **the Lord** and live according to the world's standards, it only intensifies the power of the wicked. When believers choose that path, becoming functionally unbelievers, they may discover that **Ha'Shem** allows them to get what they deserve, just as **the Israelites** experienced **Abimelech**.

But believers living in **the world (First John 2:15-16)** can never negate **God's**

sovereignty. **He** is in control whether they acknowledge **Him** or not. **YHVH** moves things to **His** intended outcome (see the commentary on **Romans Ae – My Position on T.U.L.I.P. or Calvinism**), and whatever gods have been used to replace **Him** will prove to be worthless in the day of trouble, just as **Ba'al-Berith** proved to be for **the leading citizens of Shechem,** who took refuge in the pagan temple from **Abimelech**.[251]



The slaughter itself is told with a dreadful matter-of-factness. **So each of his men cut down some branches, following Abimelech's example. They piled the branches against the walls of the temple and set them on fire,** incinerating everyone inside. In the prophecy of the fate of **the Shechemites**, **Jotham** had spoken of **trees** and **fire**. Now, with awful accuracy, **his** words had been fulfilled. **Fire had come out from** that **thornbush, Abimelech (9:14-15), the one they** had chosen as **king**, **and devoured them all (9:20a)**. Unwittingly, this fulfilled **Jotham's curse** (see **Bj – The Curse of Jotham**). **So all the people who had retreated to the tower of Shechem died – about a thousand men and women (9:49 NLT).** The mention of **them** at the very end emphasizes the full horror of what happened; its immense, deep, tragedy.[252]

*Dear heavenly **Father**, Praise **You** that **You** are not mean and wrathful, but full of steadfast love, **righteousness**, **justice** and mercy. **You** rule with both love and discerning righteous wisdom. **Righteousness and justice are the foundation of Your throne. Lovingkindness and truth go before You (Psalms 89:14).** The*

*wicked may appear to prosper for a time; but then **You**, **ADONAI**, will break their strength, while upholding the righteous with an eternal inheritance. **Better a little that the righteous have than the wealth of many wicked. For the arms of the wicked will be broken, while ADONAI upholds the righteous. ADONAI knows the days of the blameless—their inheritance endures forever (Psalms 37:16-18)**. So much greater than ruling a city, as **Abimelech** desired, is the joy and peace that comes from desiring to please and to live for **You**. **You** are my strength and my portion. **Whom have I in heaven but You? On earth there is none I desire besides You. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. (Psalms 73:25-26).** It is comforting to know that while the wicked prosper, **You** are my refuge. I desire to please **You** in every way possible. To **the One** who sits at **Your** right hand. Amen*