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JOTHAM'S FABLE: A PEOPLE AND LEADERSHIP CALLED TO SERVE (JUDGES 8:22-9:57)

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This paper interprets the political saga of Gideon and Abimelech, particularly evident in different views of the monarchy (Jgs 8:22-9:57). While Gideon refuses the offered kingship, Abimelech ruthlessly seizes the kingship through a fearful fratricide. The various episodes reveal different attitudes towards kingship as Israel “feels its way” to the monarchy. Jotham’s fable, with its political caricatures, contrasts the arrogant, self-serving, and dangerous bramble (Abimelech) with the altruistic service of the horticultural trio (olive tree, fig tree, and vine), signifying the people of God and their leaders. Together they affirm that their true goal is to bring God’s blessing to others, to produce *fruitful* items that all may enjoy alike. Their purpose is not that of a fruitless rule over the people of God. The entire story affirms the truth that God alone is the foundation of his people and their rulers. Israel’s calling is that of service to God and the community. A flow-chart, labeled table 3, at the end of the article expresses the points of continuity and contrast in these episodes, and supports a unified narrative in its canonical form.

I. INTRODUCTION

God alone is the foundation of his people and their rulers. Israel’s calling is that of service to God and the community.

Cartoons and satire play a telling role in the political processes of different countries. In American political commentary, after a long, drawn-out session filled

with rhetoric and heated argument between the president, Senate, and House of Representatives over some controversial topic, a skilled artist is able to perceive the real issues. She then draws a political caricature of the leading persons and their behavior, which sums up the whole debate. Witness, for example, the numerous cartoons found in the newspapers during times such as Watergate, the Enron scandal, and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Cartoonists poke truthful humor at the leaders of involved countries, particularly. Animated satire conveys truth in a simplified manner—easy to grasp and hence, welcomed by the public. The Bible provides an excellent example of satirical writing in Jotham's fable (Jgs 9:8-15).¹

It is argued that the use of the trio of horticultural images (olive tree, fig tree, and vine) in Jotham's fable refer to the vocation of service of the people of God and their leaders.

Recent work on the text of Judges 8:22-9:57 highlights other aspects of the full narrative.² Earlier scholarship highlights the sources³ or unity with a

¹ Fables are found in the OT (2 Kgs 14:9; Ez 17) referring to political situations and in the Babylonian "contest literature" as noted by W. G. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1960), 150. Others place it in the context of Sumerian disputation speech. These include Willy Schottroff, "Das Weingberlied Jesajas (Jes. 5:1-7): Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Parabel," *ZAW* 82 (1970): 86; B. Landsberger, "Jahreszeiten im Sumerisch—Akkadischen," *JNES* 8 (1949): 259ff; J. J. A. Van Dijk, *Las Sagesse Sumero—Akkadischen* (Leiden, Neth.: E.J. Brill, 1953), 12-13; Silvia Tatu, "Jotham's Fable and the Crux Interpretum in Judges IX," *VT* 56 (2001):108-110. For an Egyptian origin, see Hermann Ranke, *Aegypten* (Tubingen, Ger.: J.C.B. Mohr, 1923), 429ff.

² In a helpful manner, Hayyim Angel portrays Gideon's positive and negative traits, which are further expressed through his two sons through idealism and realism in "The Positive and Negative Traits of Gideon as Reflected in His Sons Jotham and Abimelech," *Jewish Biblical Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (2006): 159-167. Volkmar Fritz argues for a complex series of sources for the entire saga, which builds on some of the contradictions in Judges 9, the first of which is the Gaal episode (9:26-41) in "Abimelech Und Sichem in JDC: IX," *Vetus Testamentum* 32, no. 2 (1982): 143. T. A. Boogaart argues for the centrality of the retribution theory—stone (9:5,53) for stone—which governs the narrative; he also notes the divine involvement in the story in "Stone for Stone: Retribution in the Story of Abimelech and Shechem," *JSOT* no. 32 (1985): 52. For further comment on retribution, see also Klaus Koch, "Gibt es ein Vergeltung in Alten Testament?" *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* (1955): 1-42. Thomas A. Janzen, building upon Boogaart, gives attention to the "lone-woman" in 9:5, since the main events in Judges 9 reflect the decisions of men. He also looks to the singleness motif (one ruler better than 70), "upon one (אחת) stone" in vss. 6 and 18, one "head" in 9:37, and the lone (אחת) woman in v. 53. Schöpflin also argues for a retribution theory but understands the complementation between Jotham's prophetic comment on Abimelech's fratricide and its fulfillment in Abimelech's untimely death due to divine punishment. Schöpflin also argues for a retribution theory that expresses divine punishment. See Karin Schöpflin, "Jotham's Speech and Fable as Prophetic Comment on Abimelech's Story," *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 18, no. 1 (2004): 3-32. Tatu's article, "Jotham's Fable," pages 105-122, on the fable begins with a discussion of the metaphorical use of the trees of the Bible, with special attention to the genus of the "bramble" in vss. 14-15. Daniel Block argues for a comprehensive reading of the entire Gideon cycle, in which Gideon's positive behavior is countered by numerous negatives in "Will the Real Gideon Please Stand Up?: Narrative Style and Intention in Judges 6-9," *Journal of the Evangelical Theology Society* 40, no. 3 (September 1997): 353-366.

process of Deuteronomic redaction.⁴ While source-critical scholarship is helpful, it often overlooks the overall plot or theme that is inherent in the text in its present canonical form. In general, interpreters who divide the sources into J and E, view the fable as being derived from the E source in the north.

The Abimelech episode marks a turning point in the book of Judges, in that it shows the tragedy of the people of God and their ruler, who has not been chosen or anointed by Yahweh.

From Abimelech's time on, the land does not recover its peace; deliverance is less complete; Jephthah fails where Gideon succeeded in avoiding civil war. If the Samson episode is regarded as part of the central theme—and this is implied by 10:7-9—then at the very end there is lacking something which is normally regarded as basic to this theme; for Samson is a judge in Israel, but he does not effect any real liberation.⁵

The concluding Samson-cycle of stories reveals the way in which this “judge” uses his charisma to play practical jokes and to execute personal revenge.

However, in the context of Judges 9, the tree trio (olive tree, fig tree, vine) appear to belong to an old tradition that speaks about the people of God and their leaders, and their call to service—not a vain and posturing waving over the trees (9:9, 11, 13). While many scholars look to the evil, perpetrated by Abimelech and the men of Shechem, very little attention is given to the use of the metaphorical trio and the positive lesson to be gleaned from the fable and its application within the context of 8:22-9:57.

Jotham's fable may be the most crucial part of Judges in that it stresses how Israel's life will be conducted in the future. Previously they have been led by leaders chosen by Yahweh such as Moses, Aaron, and Joshua, who brought them out of Egypt and led them through the wilderness to the land promised to Israel. The people were constantly on the move and only recently became settled in the Promised Land through a partial conquest of the land, which becomes complete under David and Solomon. The question is this: How will their lives be governed in the new land? Yahweh has been their leader and ruler. The designation of Israel's leaders as “servants” communicates much (Jo 1:11; 5:11). Will they be a ruling or serving people? This is the same issue, brought forward

³ Hugo Winckler, *Altorientalische Forschungen* (Leipzig, Ger.: Verlag von Eduard Pfeiffer, 1897), 59-62; Julius Wellhausen, *Die Composition des Hexateuchs and der historischen Bucher des Alten Testaments* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1963), 222-223; Cuthbert Aikman Simpson, *Composition of the Book of Judges* (Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell, 1967), 40-44; Otto Eissfeldt, *Die Quellen des Richterbuches* (Leipzig, Ger.: J. C. Hinriches, 1925), 59-62. L designates a less spiritual lay source as shown in Karl L. Budde, *Das Buch der Richter* (KAT) (Freiburg: Verlag von J.C.B. Mohr Paul Siebeck, 1897), 69-70. Robert Boling has a helpful chart in which he traces through the composition of Judges in *Judges* (New York: Doubleday, 1975), 30.

⁴ Vincenz Zapletal, *Das Buch der Richter* (Münster in Westf, Ger.: Aschendorff, 1923), 162; Hugo Gressman, *Die Anfänge Israels* (Göttingen, Ger.: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1914), 215-222; M. J. Lagrange, *Le Livre des Juges* (Paris: Librairie Lecoffre, 1930), 181.

⁵ J. P. U. Lilley, “A Literary Appreciation of the Book of Judges” *TB* 18 (1967): 98.

in 1 Samuel 8, occasioned by the Samuel's advanced age and his sons's debacle. The elders come to Samuel to ask him "to appoint for us a king to govern us, like other nations" (8:4ff). Is Judges 9 a kind of foreshadowing of what would happen one day? Yahweh tells Samuel that the "people have rejected me as their king" (1 Sm 8:7). Thus, we find a mixed attitude regarding the monarchy: (1) rejection of Yahweh, and (2) a divine accommodation to the people's request for a "kingly symbol" even when Samuel spells out the ugly and selfish consequences of their choice—not Yahweh's (1 Sm 8:10-18). These classic consequences parallel the fable's depiction of rulership as "swaying over trees."

The positive lesson from Gideon, the trio in the fable, and Jotham's explanation and prophetic curse are often left untreated. Further, the negative lessons concerning the people of God and their ruler highlight the positive example of service to God and the community of God.

Each of the three metaphors of the trio is used in parabolic fashion in both the Old Testament and New Testament, and one is often coupled with another. This is shown in table 1. In many of these passages, the writers equate the horticultural imagery with the people of God and their leaders. There is also a certain fluidity of symbolism wherein the thought changes from the fruit of the vine to the whole vineyard, sometimes by a parallelism of members (Hos 9:10). Further, in several passages, the combination of metaphors serves as an idiomatic expression of idyllic peace or paradisiacal fertility, "every man under his vine and under his fig-tree" (2 Kgs 18:31 = Is 36:16; 1 Kgs 4:25; Mi 4:4; Zec 3:10; also 1 Mc 14:12; Gn 49:11-12, 22-23). Indeed, one is able to find a metaphorical salvation-history through the lens of these horticultural images in a progressive work of reinterpretation through the history of both testaments.

Jotham's fable and its application within its context points to Israel's true servant calling which was to be heard and enacted in Israel's salvation history. That history began with the call to Abraham.

In the call of Abraham (Gn 12:1-3), God promised him: (1) a great name and nation, (2) a land, and (3) an influence that would be world-wide. While the vocation is unique, the stress falls on greatness. Isaac's blessing to Jacob affirmed, "Let peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may your mother's sons bow down to you" (Gn 27:29). In Genesis 49:8-9, Jacob foretold Judah's rule: "Your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies, your father's sons shall bow down before you." This prophecy is also expressed in language of the vine (49:11-12, 22-24). These texts and many others speak in terms of greatness and superiority, and not of service.

Table 1. The Agrarian trio

Metaphor(s)	Biblical texts
Vine/vineyard	Genesis 49:11-12, 22-24; Isaiah 3:14, 5:1-7, 27:2-6, 28:4; Jeremiah 2:21; Psalms 80; Ezekial 15, 17, 19:10-14; Mark 12:1-12 <i>par.</i> ; Matthew 21:28-32; Jn 15:1-17
Fig tree	Jeremiah 24, 29:17; Amos 8:1-3; Mark 11.12ff. <i>par.</i> ; Matthew 21:28-32; John 1:45-51
Olive tree	Zechariah 4; Romans 11:11-24; Revelation 11:1-13
Vine/vineyard and fig tree	Hosea 2:12, 9:10, 16; Micah 4:4, 7:1; Jeremiah 8:13; Joel 1:7, 12; 2:22; 1 Kings 4:25; 2 Kings 18:31; Isaiah 34:4, 36:16; Zechariah 3:10; Psalms 105:33; Cant 2:13; Nehemiah 13:15; Luke 13:6-9; Matthew 7:16 = Luke 6:44
Vine/vineyard and olive tree	Job 15:33; Psalm 128:3; Exodus 23:11; Deuteronomy 6:11, 24:20-21, 28:39-40; Job 24:13; 1 Samuel 8:14; 2 Kings 5:26, 18:32; 1 Chronicles 27:27-28; Nehemiah 5:11, 9:25; Hosea 14:6-7; Micah 6:15
Vine/vineyard, fig tree, and olive tree	Judges 9:8-13; Hebrews 3:17; Jeremiah 5:17 (LXX); Haggai 2:19 (with pomegranate); 2 Kings 18:31-32; Amos 4:9; Deuteronomy 8:8

Jotham's fable, with its political caricatures, contrasts the arrogant, self-serving, and dangerous bramble (Abimelech) with the altruistic service of the metaphorical trio, each of whom affirms that the true goal in life is to bring God's blessings to others, to produce fruit that all may enjoy; in a word, to serve others. It is hard to imagine anything more contrary to the idea of rulership and monarchy, to the grandeur of a David or a Solomon. There is a unique depth to the fable as a forerunner to the Servant Songs of Deutero-Isaiah and especially to the one who came not to be served but to serve (Mk 10:45). The Gideon episode, the fratricide by Abimelech, and Jotham's fable with its fulfillment and application, all combine to reveal the writer's serious doubts concerning the monarchy as well as his deep conviction that the people of God are here to serve—not rule or wave over the trees. The fable is set within the context of a book that depicts the cruelty and duplicity of life and exposes the shambles that the people of God make of their calling to service, even exemplified in some of the unsavory charismatic heroes or heroines. The perspective of this story (Jgs

8:22-9:57) is far larger than simple retribution theory and includes the positive goal of the people of God and its rulers. The purpose of the fable is, therefore, to reveal Israel's high calling and its leaders to serve others. It is presented in sharp contrast to the self-assumed, self-seeking, and cruel rule of Gideon's defiant son, Abimelech.

The Abimelech episode falls within the central section of the book (2:6-16:31), which unfolds the stories of the various charismatic heroes or heroines. The editor does not give Abimelech the title of judge but depicts him as "a man of perdition,"⁶ an arch-enemy of God and his people. It is not said of him that he judged (שפט) but that he was made king (9:6) and that "he reigned" (וישר—9:22).

II. INTERPRETATION

Prologue (Jgs 8:22-35): The Type of Service Seen in Gideon (Hero)

The prologue connects the Abimelech episode with the Gideon saga(s) (Jgs 6-8). When Abimelech appeals to the lords of Shechem to make him king, he hints at the words of Gideon concerning rulership (9:2; cf. 8:23). It is vital for the interpretation of the fable to note that Israel offers the kingship to Gideon (8:22f). He refuses it not only for himself and his sons, but he proclaims emphatically, *the Lord shall rule over you* (יהוה ימשל בכם—8:23). His refusal lies in sharp contrast to the following demand by Abimelech for kingship, a demand that he executes by the murder of his brothers.

In denying the request for kingship, Gideon makes his own request—for the earrings that were plundered from the Midianite invaders. The request is honored and Gideon takes the gold and fashions an ephod, which became a *snare* (למוקש) to him and his household (8:27).⁷ The snare led to the religious prostitution of worshipping the object, which presumably was some sort of golden figure, not the priest's garment. The narrator says that he died at a good old age (8:32), but his death also is understood as the removal of restraint. After his death:

The sons of Israel again played the harlot with the Baals, and made Baal-Berith their god. Thus the sons of Israel did not remember the Lord their God, who had delivered them from the hands of all their enemies on every side; nor did they show kindness to the household of Jerubbaal (that is, Gideon), in accord with all the good that he had done to Israel. (9:33-35)

Thus, the people not only rejected the God of the covenant for the Baal of the covenant but they also denied any ongoing commitment to Gideon—two claims they should have honored.

⁶ Georges Auzou, *La Force de l'Esprit* (Paris: Editions de l'Orante, 1965), 255.

⁷ Angel interprets the ephod as an attempt to commemorate God's miraculous role in the victory (positive) and to establish Gideon's hometown as a shrine, and to bolster his sons's claim as future leaders as shown in "The Positive and Negative Traits of Gideon," p. 165.

Historical Section (Jgs 9:1-6): Gideon's Antithesis Seen in Abimelech (Villain)

Introduction to Abimelech's speech (9:1). The Abimelech episode begins with the words, "And Abimelech *went away*" (Qal—consec. impf.). The form connects the story with the prologue⁸ —Gideon's refusal of kingship, fashioning the ephod,⁹ and subsequent apostasy, his seventy sons (8:30-31), and *his concubine* (וּפִילֵגְשׁוֹ) who bore to him Abimelech.

The name Abimelech, technically means, "my father (that is to say, Yahweh) is king."¹⁰ The verb *reign* (מָלַךְ), so frequent in Kings and Chronicles, occurs with reference to Israel, only in Judges 9 (cf. Jgs 4:2 —"Jabin, king of Canaan reigned"). In chapter 9, the verb is found as an imperative (9:8, 10, 12, 14) and indicative (9:6, 16, 18), all in reference to Abimelech. Further, the noun *king* (מֶלֶךְ), occurs with reference to Israel and Abimelech only in Judges 9:6, 8, 15, and in the expression "there was no king in Israel," an expression found twice with the addition, "everyone did that which was right in his own eyes" (17:6; 21:25; 18; 19:1). Is there not intentional irony in the fable where Abimelech's name, *my father (Yahweh) is king* (occurring thirty-seven times in chapter 9) is juxtaposed to the root verb three times, "to make Abimelech king" (9:6, 16, 18)?¹¹ Josephus additionally notes that Abimelech "transformed the government into a tyranny, setting himself up to do whatsoever he pleased in defiance of the laws and showing bitter animosity against the champions of justice."¹²

Abimelech's speech (9:2). Abimelech comes to his clansmen with a proposal that he will be a fit king for them. The proposal is grounded by a two-fold argument: (1) monarchy is more efficient than oligarchy, and (2) family obligations demand it.

Abimelech comes to Shechem and speaks to the whole *clan* (מִשְׁפַּחָה) of his mother, so that they can reason with the leaders of Shechem.¹³ It appears

⁸ Haag, Simpson, Martin, and Lindars suggest two cycles of tradition which later became fused in this transition story: a Gideon cycle and a Jerubbaal cycle connected with the Abimelech episode. Herbert Haag, "Gideon-Jerubbaal-Abimelech," *ZAW* 70 (1967): 312; Cuthbert Aikmann Simpson, *Composition of the Book of Judges* (Oxford, UK: University Press, 1967), 41; James Martin, *The Book of Judges* (London: 1975), 111; Barnabas Lindars, "Gideon and Kingship," *JTS* 16 (1965): 315-326. However, the Jerubbaal/Gideon link is too strong and is too deeply entrenched in the Gideon stories to be so easily dismissed (6:32, 7:1, 8:29, 35).

⁹ C. F. Burney believes that the presence of עֵפֹד in 8:27 points to the establishment of an Ephod cult in Ophrah in *The Book of Judges and the Book of Kings* (New York: KTAV, 1970), 241. See also John Gray, *Joshua, Judges, and Ruth* (Greenwood, S.C.: Oliphants, 1952), 241.

¹⁰ Albert Vincent, *Le Livre des Juges* (Paris: Librairie leCoffre, 1958), 79.

¹¹ Angel suggests a negative translation, "My father (=Gideon) is king," in "The Positive and Negative Traits of Gideon," p. 165.

¹² Josephus, *Antiquities*, v. 233-4 (7:1). Begg draws many parallels and contrasts between Josephus's account and the biblical text. See Christopher Begg, "Abimelech, King of Shechem According to Josephus," *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 72, no. 1 (April): 146-164.

¹³ On the importance of Shechem in this period cf. W. H. Irwin, "Le sanctuaire central israelite avant l'établissement de la monarchie," *RB* (Avril, 1965): 170-175; John Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1963), 421-422; G. A. Smith, *The Historical Geography of the Holy Land* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1902), 323-341; Moore,

that Gideon, at Ophrah, valued Shechem, since he had married a Shechemite.¹⁴ Abimelech requests his relatives to speak on his behalf—*speak now in the hearing of* (דברוֹנָא בְּאָזְנֵי) to the leaders or *proprietors of Shechem* (בְּעַלֵּי שֶׁכֶם).¹⁵ The first line of argument is self-evident. Why should all the people favor a situation of many rulers (i.e., all chiefs and no Indians)? Will not one ruler be more efficient than seventy? His argument builds upon Gideon's experience of sole rule, which Abimelech seeks to claim.

The second argument concerns family obligation. Abimelech is a son of the deliverer, and the Shechemites would be in a more advantageous position by having a ruler of their own family. Zapletal notes, "The king must take care of his brothers to create for them the best positions and a profitable income."¹⁶ The concept of family obligation, expressed in the words, "your bone and flesh," is similar in current idiom, "flesh and blood." Robertson-Smith notes that "both in Hebrew and Arabic, 'flesh' is synonymous with 'clan,' or 'kindred group.'"¹⁷ Abimelech's apparent concern for efficiency and family obligation is merely a smoke screen for his real intent, personal gain through assuming the reins of power. Accordingly, he describes "the state of affairs as unfavorably as possible to the Shechemites."¹⁸

Response to Abimelech's speech (9:3-5). The appeal falls on fertile ground, and the leadership of Shechem stands ready to follow Abimelech. Nielsen comments:

When they said, "He is our brother," they certainly did not prefer him for reasons of pride. If this had been the case, they would have given him support in a more direct way than they actually did. Their reflections may have been something like this, "considerable risks are connected, therefore fetch some money from the treasury of the God; by means of this, Abimelech will be enabled to take care of himself, and no suspicion could be thrown upon us."¹⁹

The seventy shekels (one for each life?) are taken from the temple treasury of Baal-Berith (El-Berith in v. 46),²⁰ and a bodyguard of thugs (cf. 11:3; 1

Judges, 240; Hugo Gressman, *Die Anfänge Israels* (Berlin: Göttingen, Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1914), 218.

¹⁴ cf. Gressmann, *Die Anfänge Israels*, 218; For the friendly relationship, cf. Friedrich Notscher, *Die Heilige Schrift* (Wurzburg: Echter Verlag, 1965), 688.

¹⁵ Burney, *The Book of Judges*, 270; Moore, *Judges*, 241; Le P.M.J. Lagrange, *Le Livre des Juges*, 164. (Similar use in 1 Sm 23:11-12; 2 Sm 21:21.)

¹⁶ Zapletal, *Das Buch der Richter*, 141.

¹⁷ W. Robertson Smith, *The Religion of the Semites* (New York: Meridian Books, 1956), 274; Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Social Institutions* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1965), 5. On the sadiqu marriage, cf. W. Robertson Smith, *Kinship and Marriage* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1903), 77.

¹⁸ Budde, *Das Buch der Richter*, 71.

¹⁹ Edward Nielsen, *Shechem: A Traditio-Historical Investigation* (Copenhagen: G.E.C. Gad, 1959), 145.

²⁰ Moore, *Judges*, 242. Moore regards these as equivalent places with el as the numen loci and baal as god proprietor of the place. See also Georg Fohrer, *History of Israelite Religion* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1972), 48.

Sm 22:22) is hired and formed around Abimelech. The seventy shekels appear to be a fearful omen of what is coming.

With his hired body-guards, Abimelech goes to his father's home in Ophrah and murders his seventy brothers (cf. also 2 Kgs 10:1-14, 11:1-3). Zapletal notes, "Only by total extermination could the attacker assure himself that there would be no one left to carry on the blood feud."²¹ The phrase, *upon one stone* (עַל־אֶבֶן אַחַת), repeated in Jotham's speech (9:18) may suggest a sacrificial slaughter,²² but it certainly prefigures the *lex talionis* ("law of just revenge" or retribution theory) narrated in 9:53 when an upper millstone crushes Abimelech's skull. Just as Abimelech kills seventy brothers upon one stone, so he is killed by a millstone (v. 53).

The extermination is not total, for Jotham, the youngest son, escapes. The youngest son of a family always held a special place in the hearts of the Israelites (Gn 42:13, 38). Thus, young Jotham as the "mediator of *this warning* would make the warning more acceptable in the eyes of the Israelite audience."²³

Coronation and setting of stage for fable (9:6). After the fratricide, the Shechemites assemble together with all *Beth-Millo* (בֵּית מִלּוֹ)²⁴ and make Abimelech king (9:6). Since there is no mention of a federation of tribes, one concludes that the monarchy is of a limited scope. It is ironic that this is the first time that the term *king* is applied to an Israelite.

Thus, we find in this short historical section, a ruthless seizure of power, which Abimelech's father had refused for himself and for his sons. The motives of both Abimelech and the Shechemites are equally selfish. Abimelech proves to be the antithesis of what a king should be—selfish, arrogant, dishonest, cruel, and murderous. In a region where Israel and Canaan are living side by side, Abimelech proves that he is no judge, but an arrogant tyrant. The stage is set for Jotham's fable.

²¹ Zapletal, *Das Buch der Richter*, 142.

²² Ernst Sellin, *Wie Wurde Sichem eine Israelitische Stadt?* (Leipzig: A. Deichertsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1922), 26; Arthur Cundall, *Judges: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downer's Groves, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1968), 127; Robert Boling, *Judges*, 171.

²³ Eugene Maly, "The Jotham Fable—Anti-Monarchial?" *CBQ* 22 (1960): 300.

²⁴ There is much to favor the meaning of citadel for Beth-Millo (Ha-Millo in 2 Sm 5:9; 1 Kgs 9:15, 24, 11:27; 2 Chr 32:5; perhaps 2 Kgs 12:21). If the term meant "house of the fortress" then it is easily identified with the tower of Shechem (9:46, 49). See Burney, *The Book of Judges*, 272.

Jotham's Fable (Jgs 9:7-17)

Introduction to Fable (9:7). This section opens with the words, “and they told it to Jotham” (4:7).²⁵ Of what is Jotham informed? Not the slaughter of his brothers which Jotham knew all too well, but rather the day of Abimelech’s coronation (v. 19; i.e., a time later than the massacre in Ophrah).²⁶ Jotham’s role as a hero is also bound up with the role of narrator himself, so much so that Jotham becomes the mouth-piece of the narrator. He speaks from a lofty precipice of Mt. Gerizim overlooking the city, where he can be seen, heard, and recognized, but at a distance which will not endanger himself.²⁷ Through Jotham’s fable and its explanation, we find the narrator’s theological interpretation of brutal violence in verses 1-6.

Fable—Offer and refusal of kingship (9:8-13): The fable begins with the words, “Once the trees went forth²⁸ to anoint a king to rule over them.” Immediately, there is an inconsistency with the prologue and historical section where the offer of kingship had been extended to Gideon (8:22), but not to Abimelech. Abimelech was not approached by the men of Shechem, but had offered himself as king. We find a certain looseness in the fable and application “quite consonant with the Oriental manner.”²⁹ However, the looseness need not suggest different sources; it is possible, however, that the expression hints at a monarchical leaning such as is encountered in 1 Samuel 8. This is the only place prior to Samuel and Kings where the verb *to anoint* (*māšāḥ*), is used of a king. Samuel will be commissioned to anoint Saul as king, and when he does so, Samuel says, “The Lord has anointed you” (1 Sm 10:1); to the people Samuel will say, “See the one whom the Lord has chosen” (10:24). Similarly, David is called the “anointed of the God of Jacob” (2 Sm 23:1). The trees initiate the search “to anoint a king,” while future narratives affirm that YAHWEH is the one who both chooses and anoints—not the people. True, the verb *māšāḥ* will be found frequently with reference to the consecration of priests, but not of kings and it is seen as a rejection of Yahweh’s rule.³⁰ The anointing becomes the

²⁵ Nielsen notes how the verb *nāgād* contains the idea of “informing” or “betraying” which is ‘almost the leitmotif of this whole story’; see vv. 29-31, v. 25, vv. 46 in *Shechem*, p. 146.

²⁶ Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 176; Nielsen, *Shechem*, 146.

²⁷ Zapletal recounts his own experience of speaking and shouting on Mt. Gerizim in *Das Buch der Richter*, p. 145. cf. W. M. Thomson, *The Land and the Book* (New York: Harper & Row, 1859), 2:209-210.

²⁸ Lit., “going, they went” (הלך הלכו) Hebrew font, with the infinitive absolute preceding the main verb and carries little emphasis. E. Kautzsch and A. E. Cowley, *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 113.

²⁹ Burney, *The Book of Judges*, 275. The closest parallel is found in the Words of Ahikar as noted in A. Cowley, *Aramaic Papyri of the Fifth Century* (Oxford, UK: University Press, 1923), 224.

³⁰ Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 2:324-327. Von Rad rightly distinguishes between the earlier pro-monarchical Saul source and the later anti-monarchical Samuel source to which this fable belongs. The later Samuel source “lacks the freshness and piety of the other” (p. 326).

means of investiture with the royal office, “the setting apart of its subject,”³¹ with its dire consequences, later expressed by Samuel.

The offer of the trees is extended in succession to the olive-tree, the fig-tree, and the vine, which produced three of the most staple items in Palestine.³²

The offer of the trees is extended in succession to the olive tree, the fig tree, and the vine, which produced three of the most staple items in Palestine.³³ The horticultural trio refuses the offer and the reasons given are highly suggestive. In each case, the fruit-bearing plant or tree would have to abandon its essential character of service, which has a positive value for God and humans.

The beneficent quality, explicit in the olive tree and vine (i.e., to gods and men³⁴), is also implicit in the fig tree. The fatness, sweetness, good fruit, and new wine are for people. Each of the three expresses a sense of destiny. Each must maintain its given identity in order to produce good things for others. Surely this is a sufficient reason for their united refusal of the offer to rule.

³¹ Gray, *Joshua, Judges, and Ruth*, 244. Ernst Kutsch draws parallels with the Egyptian custom of anointing the Pharaoh in *Salbung als Rechtsakt* (Berlin: Verlag Alfred Töpelman, 1963), 56-7. Roland de Vaux points to the existence of anointing prior to the monarchy in Canaanite practice in *Ancient Israel: Religious Institutions* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1965).

³² J. C. Trever notes, “Use of the tree and its fruit for food, fuel, light, carpentry, ointments, medicines, etc., touched almost every phase of daily life” in “Olive-Tree,” *IDB*, 3 (1962): 596. Zapletal, in *Das Buch der Richter* (p. 146), comments from Columella de re rustica V, 8, by saying, “Olea . . . prima omnium arborum est.” For a description of this tree’s importance see George Adam Smith, *Jerusalem* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1907), 299-302. For the fig tree and bibliography cf. J. C. Trever, “Fig-Tree,” *IDB*, 4 (1962): 784-7. On the poetry and rhythm see Eduard Sievers, *Metrische Studien* (Leipzig: B.G. Teubner, 1901), 388-389; J. W. Rothstein, “Jotham’s Fable (Jud. 9, 7-15) rhythmisch-kritisch behandelt,” *ZAW* 26 (1912): 22-9.

³³ J. C. Trever notes, “Use of the tree and its fruit for food, fuel, light, carpentry, ointments, medicines, etc., touched almost every phase of daily life” in “Olive-Tree,” *IDB*, Vol. III, (1962) 596. Zapletal, in *Das Buch der Richter* (p. 146), comments from Columella de re rustica V, 8 by saying, “Olea . . . prima omnium arborum est” cf. For a description of this tree’s importance see George Adam Smith, *Jerusalem* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1907), 299-302. For the fig tree and bibliography cf. J. C. Trever, “Fig-Tree,” *IDB*, Vol. IV, (1962) 784-7. On the poetry and rhythm see Eduard Sievers, *Metrische Studien* (Leipzig: B.G. Teubner, 1901), 388-389; J. W. Rothstein, “Jotham’s Fable (Jud. 9, 7-15) rhythmisch-kritisch behandelt,” *ZAW* 26 (1912), 22-9.

³⁴ It is our suggestion that the form אלהים is best translated in the MT by “gods” rather than Israel’s personal God. The reason for doing so lies in the context of a mythical fable in which plants move, think, and talk. It would appear to be anomalous to introduce the reality of Israel’s God into this allegorical fable. Ultimately, the reality of the allegorical fable does point to the beneficent nature of Israel’s leaders as they serve as purposeful good for God and men. However, we argue that the initial fable speaks about the trees and their service oriented behavior to “gods and men.”

Table 2. The Agrarian trio's refusal to accept kingship

Fruit-bearing plant or tree	Reason for refusal of kingship
“to the olive-tree” (לַזַּיִת)—v. 8	“my fatness (אֶת־דִּשְׁנִי) which by me both gods and men are honored”—v. 9 ³⁵
“to the fig-tree” (לַתְּאֵנָה)—v. 10	“my sweetness and my good fruit” (אֶת־מִתְקִי וְאֶת־תְּנוּבַתִּי הַטּוֹבָה)—v. 11
“to the vine” (לַגֶּפֶן)—v. 12	“my new wine (אֶת־תִּירוֹשִׁי) which cheers gods and men”—v. 13

Yet there is another reason (i.e., a low esteem of kingship). To forsake fruit bearing for royalty constitutes a mere “waving over the trees,” repeated three times for emphasis (vss. 9, 11, 13). The verb *to wave*, *to sway* (נו) is the characteristic motion of a tree in the wind (Is 7:2), and is used here in the derogatory sense of “mere posturing in contrast to fruitful contribution,”³⁶ “authority over subjects to obey his beck and nod.”³⁷ The verb נוֹע is translated in the LXX A through the active infinitive ἄρχεῖν (“to rule”), while the LXX B

³⁵ The LXX A translates the MT by ἣν ἐν ἐμοὶ ἐδόξασεν ὁ θεὸς καὶ ἄνθρωποι, “which by me, God and men glorify/honor,” while the LXX B provides the reading, ἐν ἧ δόξαζουσι τὸν θεὸν ἄνδρες, “in which men glorify God.” In contrast to the MT, the LXX A makes the MT object “gods” (אֱלֹהִים) into the singular and personal subject “God” in addition to making men the subject, not the object of the verb. The LXX B makes “men” the subject of the verb, and makes the singular, “God” into the direct object. The MT of vss. 9 and 13 are parallel in the MT, making “gods and men” into the objects of the verb, honored (v. 9), or “cheers” (v. 13). Both LXX A and LXX B translate the object by “God and men,” in distinction from the MT plural form אֱלֹהִים. The Vulgate translates the MT *qua et dii utuntur et homines*, “by which gods and men are honored,” which is close to the MT. It is our suggestion that there is a conscious parallelism with v. 13, in which the Piel form introduces the object, “gods and men,” whether the subject be “fatness” (v. 9) or “new wine” (v. 13). Josephus makes no such object of “honor” or “cheers.” Pseudo-Philo does mention that the apple tree provides sweet-smelling fruit *for men* (37:3) but “the gods” or “God” are not mentioned as beneficiaries. Naomi Cohen notes the relative infrequency of the idiom, “gods (God) and men,” which is only found in Proverbs 3:4 and here in Judges 9:9, 13, but also notes a greater frequency in the rabbinic sources in contexts of wine and the happiness it brings. Naomi G. Cohen, *Philo's Scriptures: Citations from the Prophets and Writings* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2007), 203. Willem F. Smelik in the Targum Jonathan translates the MT expression, “by which gods and men are honored” (v. 9) or “which cheers gods and men” (v. 13), with the expression, “which they libate before the Lord and which the chiefs delight in.” He notes that God’s rejoicing is obliterated while the chiefs rejoice. He states that “the real sensitivity is related to the implication that God would have been enjoying wine.” He argues that the Targum’s general de-anthropomorphism would not expect that God could be influenced or affected by human behavior in *The Targum of Judges* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995), 524-5.

³⁶ Gray, *Joshua, Judges, and Ruth*, 244.

³⁷ Wolfgang Richter, *Traditionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zum Richterbuch* (Bonn: Peter Hanstein Verlag, 1963), 250.

translates the verb by the passive infinitive, κινεῖσθαι (“to be set in motion,” “to be stirred,” “to be moved”).³⁸ Since the Hebrew verb נוּע is translated as “quiver, waver, wave, tremble, totter, scatter,”³⁹ generally in negative contexts, the LXX B is probably the better reading, since it conveys the idea of a “fruitless” rustling of leaves above the trees. Josephus does not include the verb “to wave” in the refusal of the horticultural trio, but expresses the reason for their refusal, “she refused (fig-tree) because she enjoyed the esteem that was all her own and not conferred from without by others.”⁴⁰ The horticultural trio find meaning in their *fruitful* purpose, not in a *fruit/less* position of rustling waving of leaves in the wind. Purpose is paramount against a requested position.

Pseudo-Philo notes that the trio consists of fig tree, vine, and apple, who similarly reject the initial offer of continued rulership while each member of the trio pronounces doom on Abimelech. The sense of destiny is expressed by the fig tree in the words, “Was I indeed born in the kingdom or in the rulership over the trees? Or was I planted to that and that and that I should reign over you?”⁴¹ He says that the fig tree refused because she enjoyed the specific contribution she made to others. It is also interesting to note that Pseudo-Philo “out-allegorizes” the original allegorical fable with individual identification of each of the trees (fig tree = the people, vine = the ones before us, apple tree = chastisers) and the thorn as well. Jacobson notes that Pseudo-Philo’s version provides the reason for the trio’s refusal in the expression, “I am content to provide my fruit,”⁴² without reaching beyond for the proffered kingship. Smelik notes that the Targum Jonathan translates the Hebrew metaphor לְנוּע (“to wave”) by the “realistic words לְמַעַבְד מַלְכוּ,”⁴³ “to exercise kingship.” It appears that the Targum Jonathan uses separate verbs for God and humans to protect God’s superiority. In keeping with the mythical language of the fable, the text using the metaphorical-pejorative, “waving over the trees” (Masoretic Text) is to be preferred over other readings that express the reality for the trees’ refusal (e.g., rulership or appointment to rulership).

The expression, *waving over the trees*, will be interpreted in ugly detail by Samuel (1 Sm 8:10-17). Samuel wants the people to face the negative consequences of their choice for a king. In contrast to kingly rule, the horticultural trio spells out their goal of service in contrast to rulership. The Abimelech episode represents an abortive attempt to *sway over*, namely rule. Their response may well foreshadow the ultimate disaster of both Israel and Judah in their

³⁸ Alfred Rahlfs, *Septuaginta* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2006), 442.

³⁹ BDB, 631.

⁴⁰ *Josephus: Antiquities*, trans. and ed. H. St. J. Thackeray (Cambridge, MA: 1926-1965), 5: 233-253. Josephus changes the order of the MT ordering of the horticultural trio (fig tree-vine-olive tree). Further, the second and third members of the trio follow suit with the fig tree’s response (e.g., “it made use of the same words as the fig-tree had used before”). Josephus also changes the language from direct discourse (second person) in the MT to indirect discourse.

⁴¹ James H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985), 2: 363.

⁴² Howard Jacobson, *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996), 2: 930.

⁴³ Smelik, *The Targum of Judges*, 523.

destruction. The fruit trees and the vine have no time for such things. How can they leave their normal productive functions to adopt a ludicrous stance of fruit/less “waving over the trees: with no fruit in view? Theology is expressed through the events, Jotham’s fable, its application, and subsequent “fall-out.”

Fable—Offer and acceptance of kingship (9:14-15). Since a king could not be found among the fruit-trees, *all* (כָּל) the trees went in a desperate search for a candidate, and found one in *the buck thorn*, or *bramble* (הַאֵמֶד).⁴⁴ The bramble (Lat. *rharnus*) is of an opposite character. It can produce neither fruit nor shade (though it ironically offers its shade), but is rather a dangerous menace in the summer heat for the spreading of shrub fires. Furthermore, the arrogant response of the bramble (v. 15) is doubly ironic as evidenced in the two expressions, “if in good faith” and in the invitation, “take refuge in my shade.” Richter notes, “Nevertheless, the littler he is, the greater he acts. He offers his underlings to rest in his shadow, as if one could crawl under that thorny scrub of his, and as if there would be protection from the sun and rain. How could that little thorn bush possibly hover above the trees, next to the stately cedar?”⁴⁵

The relationship of verse 15 to verse 18 is established by three individual terms—to *anoint*, *over them*, *a king*—with future consequences spelled out in Samuel’s warning. Even though kingship is a divine accommodation to people’s need for a secure symbol, Yahweh still will be the one who anoints kings; trees or people do not anoint leaders. The fable’s message (theology) is underscored in the contrast between productive trees and an unproductive/dangerous bramble.

Why then the sudden appearance of the cedars of Lebanon? Why was kingship not offered to them? We suggest that at one time in the pre-history of this fable, it was originally directed as a warning against the worthier members of the community, to the effect that if they did not themselves take on the task of kingship, then someone far inferior would. The result would be the destruction of the entire community, to the extent that the giant cedars of Lebanon would be threatened by the fire issuing from the bramble.

The consequences of the bramble’s election will either mean complete obedience or total destruction. Again, we sense irony in the rhetorical and conditional term, *if* (אִם), meaning the trees have not acted in good faith in making the bramble king, and therefore destruction will follow: destruction of the trees in verse 15 and of the bramble as well in verse 20.

The fable is directed to the men of Shechem and secondarily to Abimelech and portrays the positive and negative nature of leadership. Positively, the call for true leaders, representative of the people of God, means service to God and the community. Negatively, leadership or “kingship” becomes arrogant, deceptive, and self-destructive. The search of the trees for a king does not tally with the historical section (9:1-6), but it does agree with the former offer of kingship to

⁴⁴ Tatu interprets the extreme habitat, valuable shade, healthy fruit trees, but it is difficult to square with the dangerous aspects of the bramble/thorn-bush as susceptible to fire in “Jotham’s Fable,” p. 124.

⁴⁵ Richter, *Traditionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen*, 285.

Gideon (8:22). He declines with the words “Yahweh shall rule over you.” He, like the trio, refuses “to wave over the trees,” and views his own task in terms of service. It is not merely that the trio forms a sharp contrast to the bramble, but a contrast to the rest of the book of Judges. Why? Is it mere chance that the contrast is found, or does there emerge at this precise time an inherent purpose for the people of God and their leaders to discover that God is both their foundation and the one who calls them to serve God and his community? In the application which follows, Jotham reapplies the original message of the fable to his audience with a new twist.

Application of Jotham’s Fable (Judges 9:16-21)

Interpretation of Fable (9:16-18). The words *and now* (ועתה) in verse 16 mark a new section that is joined to the conclusion of the fable (v. 15), which serves as a warning to Abimelech and the men of Shechem who have participated in the fratricide (9:6). The connection with the end of the fable is found in the words, *in good faith* (באמת —v. 15) *and in integrity* (ובתמים). In verse 15, the question concerned the good faith of the people to their new king, although the application pointedly questions their good faith to Jerubbaal. The conjunction *if* (אם) grammatically introduces a long conditional sentence, while the bitter irony of the application points to a very strong negation to the conditional sentence, “certainly not.”⁴⁶ “The triple protasis (“if-clauses” in vss. 16, 19a) is separated from its apodosis (“then clause,” v. 19b) by a parenthetical review of Jerubbaal’s deserts and the sins of the Shechemites.”⁴⁷ The awkwardness of the link between verse 15b and verse 16 has led some interpreters to suggest that verses 16b-19a are a later addition.⁴⁸ However, despite its awkwardness, the application does have a vigor and passion not usually found in glosses. Zapletal raises an important question: “Why should Jotham, especially when he brought a fable before them, which he himself had not invented, make no application? He found the opportunity to accentuate the service of Gideon to clearly show the unworthiness of Abimelech, and to condemn the unjust conduct of the Shechemites.”⁴⁹

The theological lesson emerges in the application; Jotham both *interprets* and *prophesies*. He interprets the fable and echoes the danger and the warning; two tragic events have occurred in the slaughter of his brothers as well as in the coronation of the useless/dangerous half-brother Abimelech. At the same time, the unified voice of the trio reveals the positive goal for the people of God. Then

⁴⁶ Nielsen, *Shechem*, 152.

⁴⁷ Moore, 251.

⁴⁸ Burney, *The Book of Judges*, 275; Moore, 250-251; Boling, *Judges*, 123-174; Hans Wilhelm Hertzberg, *Die Bücher Joshua, Richter, Ruth* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1959), 205; Frederick Eiselen, *The Abingdon Bible Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1929), 366.

⁴⁹ Zapletal, *Das Buch der Richter*, 149.

Jotham proceeds to prophesy what will happen (i.e., the mutual destruction of the Shechemites and Abimelech).

In interpreting the fratricide, Jotham looks back to his father Jerubbaal as the ideal of one who was engaged in service. Jerubbaal delivered Israel from Midian (Jgs 6-8) by *risking his own life* (וישליך את-נפשו, lit. *he cast his life before*), i.e. *he hazarded his life* (9:17) and by fighting for them with a disinterestedness for his personal security (עליכם — *on your behalf*). Abimelech, however, abetted by the Shechemites, had disregarded Jerubbaal's sacrificial service and murdered his seventy sons.

Prophetic curse of the Fable (9:19-20). In prophesying mutual destruction, Jotham (v. 19) returns to the theme of good faith and sincerity (v. 16). If the answer to his series of rhetorical questions is "yes," then Jotham wishes the Shechemites and their ruler well. But, if the answer is "no" (which it is), then the words become a prophetic curse of destruction. Maly comments:

If the revolutionary turns out to be a tyrant (and that is obviously the conviction of the author), they will learn that his rule will prove as beneficial to them as the protection offered by a bramble. But if they regret their act, they will discover that it is too late. Destruction will overtake them through Abimelech.⁵⁰

Verse 20 makes it clear that *fire* (אש) will destroy both parties. Bramble and cedars will perish in the conflagration (i.e. both King Abimelech and his subjects will die).

Wrap-up (9:21). With this parting curse of mutual destruction, Jotham flees to Beer (v. 21), and the fable is complete. The way is open for God's intervention through a falling out of Abimelech and the Shechemites.

The Abimelech-Shechemite Falling Out (Jgs 9:22-55)

Jotham's prophecy of mutual destruction (i.e., curse) is developed in the following narrative. The editor, committed to the overruling action of God, notes that "God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the men of Shechem" (v. 23) for judgment and retribution (v. 24). This period includes initial difficulties between Abimelech and the men of Shechem (vss. 22-25), Gaal's conspiracy (vss. 26-29), Abimelech's two military campaigns (vss. 30-41, 42-45), and the destruction of Shechem's tower (vss. 46-49). The verb, *fight* (לָבַח) had only been used for wars against external foes; this is the first time the verb is used for internal warfare in Israel (vss. 38-39, 45, 52).

In verses 24-41, Gaal incites the people to revolt by appealing to ties of blood. Native Shechemites become pitted against the half-Israelite Abimelech (v. 28) and Zebul, his deputy. For Gaal, the conflict is motivated by the alternatives

⁵⁰ Maly, "The Jotham Fable," 304. See also Hermann Gunkel, *Das Märchen im Alten Testament* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1921), 2:18.

of fighting or losing face. The Shechemites are defeated (vss. 39-41) and the city is captured, destroyed by fire, and sown with salt (vss. 42-49).⁵¹

From verse 50-55, we read of Abimelech's demise. When he attacks the city of Thebez, he is mortally wounded by a mill-stone and killed by his armor-bearer to avoid the ignominy of perishing at the hand of a woman. Ironically, the corporate memory recollects his embarrassing legacy of being killed by a woman (2 Sm 11.21). The reference to the mill stone (v. 53) is a vivid reminder of the one stone (vss. 5, 18) where the fratricide occurred; it conveys an exact retribution set in motion by Abimelech's fratricide.

The Moral (9:56-57)

The theological interpretation of the story is found in verese 56 and 57 (i.e., divine retribution overtook both Abimelech and Shechem). The narrator claims, "God repaid the wickedness of Abimelech. God returned all the wickedness of the men of Shechem upon their heads" (v. 56). Jotham's prophetic curse is carried out by God; it corresponds to God's sending of an evil spirit between Abimelech and the men of Shechem (v. 23). The voice of God is absent in the narrative; God is known here by what he does. The people of God and their evil neophyte ruler have made a shambles of their call to service. The Hebrews overlooked secondary causes and the focus of editorial concern falls on God's direct activity in human activity. In addition, the moral is directly connected with the prologue (8:33-35), where it is said that the children of Israel apostatized again and went whoring after the Baals and made Baal-Berith their god. It is a tragic story of a people and a despot who forsook their calling to service. Boogaart has made a sound argument for the close correlation of Abimelech's encounter with the Shechemites (9:1-6) and that of Gaal's encounter with them (9:25-41) in six common incidents that are part of the narrative.⁵² By veiling the truth, Jotham relates the fable, and then interprets it powerfully to the gruesome event in 9:1-6 as well as to what will yet occur (i.e. the destruction of Abimelech and the men of Shechem). The point is that the men of Shechem and Abimelech had not acted in good faith. Therefore the fable becomes a prophetic curse. In table 2, we note several points of continuity and contrast that are traced through the various sections.

⁵¹ A. M. Honeyman, "The Salting of Shechem," *VT* 4 (1954), 192-5; Stanley Gevirtz, "Jericho and Shechem," *VT* 13 (1963), 52-62; F. Charles Fensham, "Salt as Curse in the Old Testament," *BA* 25 (1962), 48-50. The best line of reasoning, represented by Gevirtz and Fensham is to regard the salting of Shechem as the climax of destruction and curse. On the practice of such destruction and Canaanite parallels cf. Norman K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), 200.

⁵² Boogaart, "Stone for Stone," 50.

III. SUMMARY

Von Rad notes that “Jotham’s fable is designated the most forthright anti-monarchical poem in world literature.”⁵³ There is a decided anti-monarchical thrust in the prologue (8:23) and the subsequent story of the unproductive/dangerous bramble-Abimelech. But there is more to be said about the fable. Servants of God such as Gideon, the olive tree, fig tree, vine, and Jotham recognize that God is the foundation of their life. “Yahweh shall rule” (8:23). Correspondingly the people of God, represented in their ruler, are to seek service to God and the community rather than power. Gideon and the trio of olive tree, fig tree, and vine serve as a *type* of service, while Abimelech and the men of Shechem serve as an antithesis—those who are self-seeking, deceitful, manipulative, and murderous. The people of God and their leaders should serve and not grasp after authority. This is the unique message of the fable. The theological interpretation is tragically missed by the people of God in the course of their salvation history. Though the story is depicted with a graphic realism, the story has another “hidden hero, namely God,”⁵⁴ who not only sends the evil spirit between Abimelech and the men of Shechem (v. 23) but acts in judgment and retribution (vss. 56, 57). God fulfills the curse of His mouthpiece Jotham. Aggressive kingship is to die its respective death—for Abimelech and the men of Shechem, not only because of their evil motives and actions, but because the self-seeking principle must die as well. This very principle is developed in the unfolding phases of salvation history. And the issue of divine anointing, kingship, and leadership will be unfolded in Samuel’s list of the ugly consequences for the divine accommodation to provide a king, to be like the other nations (1 Sm 8:10-18). Other texts highlight the dark side of kingship that parallel the Abimelech story.

The short vignette, afforded in the book of Judges, through both hero and villain, offers readers both an old and new paradigm. The paradigm is old in that the servant model encompasses both testaments, and new, in that it will be ultimately fulfilled in the one who “did not come to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many” (Mk 10:45).

⁵³ von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 2: 59. However, Davies proposes that the J is simply a question of the wrong person as king. G. Henton Davies, “Jer. 8.22-23,” *VT*, 13 (1963), 156. cf. also Zvi Adar, *The Biblical Narrative* (Jerusalem: Department of Education and Culture of the World Zionist Organization, 1959), who states that “the subject of the chapter is not the rise and fall of Abimelech alone, but the rise and fall of the tyrant of all generations,” p. 11. This is countered by Barnabas Lindars, “Gideon and Kingship,” *JTS*, 16, (1965), 315-326; A. E. Cundall, “Judges —An Apology for the Monarchy,” *ET*, 81 (1970), 178-181.

⁵⁴ Adar, *The Biblical Narrative*, 15.

About the Author

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Table 3. Flow chart of Judges 8:22-9:57

Prologue (8:22-35)	Historical section (9:1-6)	Jotham's fable (9:7-15)	Application (9:16-21)	Abimelech – Shechemite falling out (9:22- 55)	Moral (9:56-57)
Gideon is a worthy man for kingship (22)	Abimelech is a gross caricature-satire of king (15)	Bramble is a caricature –satire of king (15)	Satire against those who made him king(16-19)	Destruction of king and people (45, 49, 54)	
People desire a king (22)	People are not looking for a king (1-6)	Trees go to anoint a king (8)			
Gideon refuses (23)	Abimelech seizes kingship (2, 6)	Bramble is eager and aggressive when kingship is offered (15)	Satire against the arrogance with the word “if” (16, 19)		
Played harlot with Baal-Berith (33)	Money from Baal-Berith (4)	Fable towards men of Shechem (7)		EI-Berith burned (46)	
No kindness to Jerubbaal (35)	Slaughter of Jerubbaal's sons (5)		“if you have dealt well with Jerubbaal's house” (16)		God repaid injustice to Jerubbaal's house (56-57)
Abimelech (31) is introduced, serving as a part of the prologue	Abimelech is central figure (1-6)	Jotham addresses men of Shechem—sows mistrust (7)	Jotham addresses men of Shechem—sows mistrust (7)		
	Abimelech's arrogance (2)	Bramble's arrogance and bartering lowers value of the kingdom (15)		Abimelech's arrogance at death (54)	

Prologue (8:22-35)	Historical section (9:1-6)	Jotham's fable (9:7-15)	Application (9:16-21)	Abimelech – Shechemite falling out (9:22- 55)	Moral (9:56-57)
	'upon one stone' (5)			Millstone for Abimelech's death (53)	
		Prophetic curse of destruction of trees made by bramble (15)	Prophetic curse of mutual destruction of Abimelech and men of Shechem (19)	Dual curse fulfilled by evil spirit from God (23, 49, 54)	God fulfills the curse
	Low view of monarchy—acquired by deceit and violence	Low view of monarchy, anointing means the pejorative, “waving over the trees”			
Apostasy (33) beginning with ephod (22)	Deceit (2)	“if in good faith” to bramble (15)	“if in good faith” to Jerubbaal (16)	Deceit (36)	
Monarchy (22)	Monarchy vss. Oligarchy (2)	Monarchy (8)	Hint that oligarchy was in order; everything goes well without a king		
		Point of fable—useful members of community have better things to do-serve and produce fruit (9, 11, 13). The useless rule and are dangerous.	Point of application—to interpret the deceitful actions and prophesy judgment for both parties		

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Israel and Canaan side by side (33)	Israel and Canaan side by side, "bone and your flesh"(2)	"fire"—עש (15)	"fire"—עש (20)	"fire"—עש(49)	"Which he had done"—עשה (56)
			Derogatory remark— "son of enslavement" (18)		