



Mass Chaos

A Study of the Book of Judges

Session 6: Abimelech

Introduction

Brainstorm some ways in which Christians today act no different from the surrounding secular culture in America.

Abimelech Murders Gideon's Sons

9:1-21

Geographic Note: Shechem was an important Canaanite city in the center of the land, from which Jacob bought a piece of land as property and there worshipped the Lord, on his way back from spending time with his uncle Laban in Paddan Aram (Gen 33:18-19). It was also the place where Joshua renewed the covenant with the Israelites and said, "As for me and my household, we will serve the LORD," and the people responded, "We too will serve the LORD, because he is our God" (Josh 24:15, 18).

Ironically in Shechem of all places (see note above), the Israelites started acting like a bunch of Canaanites. List ways in this section where the Israelites were blatantly assimilating to the surrounding culture.

Using fables with inanimate objects to tell a story was common in the ancient world.¹ What were the advantages of Jotham using this communicative approach to confront the people of Shechem for what they did?

¹ Note on 9:8 in Robert Hoerber, ed., *Concordia Self-Study Bible* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1984), 343.

Abimelech's Battle at Shechem

9:22–57

Though Abimelech wanted to be a king, he is never called a judge of Israel. What are the ways in which this chapter does not fit the surrounding chapters?

This chapter shows how the book of Judges is quickly going from bad to worse—a chaotic mess of Abimelech murdering his brothers and destroying the city of Shechem—only for him to reach a bloody end when he was murdered by a woman dropping a millstone on his head. Create a poignant, emotionally-laden, **one-word reaction** what you are thinking and feeling at the end of this chapter. We will combine all those words into a **word cloud**.

How is it actually a comfort to know that God was still in control (v. 56–57) of this chaotic mess?

Conclusion

Read the article below,² which addresses Baal worship in Israel, and think back to what you said in the introduction. How can it happen that Christians today start assimilating into the surrounding culture? What lessons are there for us and the next generation?

“Just trust the Lord!” we want to shout. We scratch our heads over the apparent ease with which Israelites fell into Baal worship again and again. We needn’t wonder. Part of our problem is that, because we access ancient Israelite culture primarily through the Bible, we assume that Scripture’s message was as available in biblical times as it is for us today (a result of what is known as our “print bias”). We also fail to understand that the average Israelite who practiced Baalism probably saw no conflict at all with his orthodox Yahwistic³ faith. How is that possible? ...

To us this seems utterly incoherent, but it is not hard to explain. Religious faiths can be thought of as operating on two levels, which bifurcate with amazing ease in a person’s mind: Level A, which is occupied with large questions (life, death, the afterlife, guilt, forgiveness, doctrine, etc.) that, frankly, most people spend little time thinking about; and Level B, the

² Kenneth A. Cherney, Jr., “To Pull Up and To Plant: Jeremiah Preaches to a Nation in Crisis,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 121:3 (Summer 2024), 205–207.

³ That is, worship of the LORD.

home of concrete and quotidian concerns like the state of my crops, my relationships, my sick child, my greedy landlord, etc. In Israel, the cult of Yahweh at the Jerusalem Temple occupied Level A. From time to time, it seems that Baal, Asherah, and do-it-yourself family religions (including the cult of the dead) moved into Level B and refused to leave.

One reason was probably accessibility. The local shrines (or “high places”) were handy, you didn’t need descendants of Aaron or Levites to staff them, and they felt like a part of your community, while the Jerusalem Temple was remote and distant both physically and psychically. Another reason is that sacred prostitution was probably not a hard sell. Child sacrifice was, but the level of commitment it demonstrated would have been impressive in a gruesome sort of way. But the main reason is that a Level-B problem is a pebble in my shoe every single day. A solution is urgent, especially if the problem is a drought, which can be fatal. Sin, guilt, forgiveness, heaven—all that can wait. A person who is suffering needs relief right now. ...

Coherence in spiritual things has never been sinful man’s strong suit. In what ways have we and our people bifurcated our spiritual lives into Level A and Level B, consigning the Holy One of Israel to the attic while allowing other gods to have the run of the ground floor? “The human mind is, so to speak, a perpetual forge of idols”⁴ and examples will not be hard to find. Interestingly, I have heard the American megachurch movement called a coarse example of religious syncretism—i.e., an attempt to worship Jesus Christ alongside the American gods of bigness, consumerism, and personal autonomy, all at the same time. Christian nationalism was mentioned earlier; might it be a form of syncretism that, like Baalism, appeals strongly to a certain demographic? Which would an outside observer conclude is the place where most American Christians truly find identity, meaning, and purpose, and which is the greater object of their apparent devotion—the ascended Lord Jesus and his body the church, or organized sports? Which alternate gods, like Baal, are currently inviting us to indulge our most depraved impulses guilt-free, and to sacrifice our children while we’re at it?

⁴ Quoting John Calvin