

## Adam Clarke:

## Introduction

Abimelech is made king; and, to secure himself in the kingdom, slays his brethren; Jotham, the youngest only escapes, Judges 9:1-4. Jotham reproves him and the Shechemites by a curious and instructive parable, Judges 9:7-21. Abimelech having reigned three years, the Shechemites, headed by Gaal the son of Ebed, conspire against him, Judges 9:22-29. Zebul, governor of the city, apprises Abimelech of the insurrection, who comes with his forces, and discomfits Gaal, Judges 9:30-40. Abimelech assaults the city, takes, beats it down, and sows it with salt, Judges 9:41-45. Several of the Shechemites take refuge in the temple of Baal-berith; Abimelech sets fire to it, and destroys in it about one thousand men and women, Judges 9:46-50. He afterwards besieges and takes Thebez; but while he is assaulting the citadel, a woman threw a piece of millstone upon his head, and killed him. Thus God requited him and the men of Shechem for their wickedness, and their ingratitude to the family of Gideon, Judges 9:51-57.

## Verse 1

Abimelech - went to Shechem - We have already seen that Abimelech was the son of Gideon, by his concubine at Shechem. His going thither immediately after his father's death was to induce his townsmen to proclaim him governor in the place of his father. Shechem was the residence of his mother, and of all her relatives.

## Verse 2

Whether is better for you, either that all the sons - This was a powerful argument: Whether will you have seventy tyrants or only one? For, as he had no right to the government, and God alone was king at that time in Israel; so he must support his usurped rule by whatever means were most likely to effect it: a usurped government is generally supported by oppression and the sword.

## Verse 3

He is our brother - We shall be raised to places of trust under him, and our city will be the capital of the kingdom.

## Verse 4

Threescore and ten pieces of silver - Probably shekels; and this was the whole of his exchequer. As he was now usurping the government of God, he begins with a contribution from the idol temple. A work begun under the name and influence of the devil is not likely to end to the glory of God, or to the welfare of man.

Hired vain and light persons - אֲנָשִׁים רַעֲיָאִים וְחֹזְקֵי אֲפֹחָזִים (anashim reykim uphochazim), worthless and dissolute men; persons who were living on the public, and had nothing to lose. Such was the foundation of his Babel government. By a cunning management of such rascals most revolutions have been brought about.

## Verse 5

Slew his brethren - His brothers by the father's side, Judges 8:30. This was a usual way of securing an ill-gotten throne; the person who had no right destroying all those that had right, that he might have no competitors.

Yet Jotham - was left - That is, all the seventy were killed except Jotham, if there were not seventy besides Jotham. All the histories of all the nations of the earth are full of cruelties similar to those of Abimelech: cousins, uncles, brothers, husbands, and fathers have been murdered by their cousins, nephews, brothers, wives, and children, in order that they might have the undisturbed possession of an ill-gotten throne. Europe, Asia, and Africa, can witness all this. Even now, some of these horribly obtained governments exist.

## Verse 6

And all the house of Millo - If Millo be the name of a place, it is nowhere else mentioned in the sacred writings. But it is probably the name of a person of note and influence in the city of Shechem - the men of Shechem and the family of Millo.

## Verse 7

Stood in the top of Mount Gerizim - Gerizim and Ebal were mounts very near to each other; the former lying to the north, the latter to the south, and at the foot of them Shechem. But see some remarks on the extent of the human voice in some hilly countries in the following extract from a late traveler in the East: -  
 "The great extent to which the sound of the voice is conveyed may be mentioned. Some persons have

thought this a proof of the extreme rarity of the atmosphere. A similar observation is made by Captain Parry in his Voyage of Discovery to the Polar Regions in 1819-20, where he states that in the depth of winter the sound of the men's voices was heard at a much greater distance than usual. This phenomenon is constantly observed on the Neilgherries. I have heard the natives, especially in the morning and evening, when the air was still, carry on conversation from one hill to another, and that apparently without any extraordinary effort. They do not shout in the manner that strangers think necessary in order to be heard at so great a distance, but utter every syllable as distinctly as if they were conversing face to face. When listening to them, I have often been reminded of those passages in holy writ where it is recorded that Jotham addressed the ungrateful men of Shechem from Mount Gerizim, that David cried "from the top of a hill afar off" to Abner and to the people that lay about their master Saul, and that Abner addressed Joab from the top of a hill. - Letters on the Climate, Inhabitants, Productions, etc., etc., of the Neilgherries, or Blue Mountains of Coimbatore, South India, by James Hough, of Madras: 1829.

That God may hearken unto you - It appears that Jotham received this message from God, and that he spoke on this occasion by Divine inspiration.

#### Verse 8

The trees went forth on a time - This is the oldest, and without exception the best fable or apologue in the world. See the observations at the end of this chapter, Judges 9:56 (note). It is not to be supposed that a fable, if well formed, requires much illustration; every part of this, a few expressions excepted, illustrates itself, and tells its own meaning.

To anoint a king - Hence it appears that anointing was usual in the installation of kings, long before there was any king in Israel; for there is much evidence that the book of Judges was written before the days of Saul and David.

The olive tree - The olive was the most useful of all the trees in the field or forest, as the bramble was the meanest and the most worthless.

#### Verse 9

Wherewith - they honor God and man - I believe the word  $\text{x}\cdot\text{x}\cdot\text{x}\cdot\text{x}\cdot\text{x}$  (elohim) here should be translated gods, for the parable seems to be accommodated to the idolatrous state of the Shechemites. Thus it was understood by the Vulgate, Arabic, and others. It is true that olive oil was often used in the service of God: the priests were anointed with it; the lamps in the tabernacle lighted with it; almost all the offerings of fine flour, cakes prepared in the pan, etc., had oil mingled with them; therefore Jotham might say that with it they honor God; and as priests, prophets, and kings were anointed, and their office was the most honorable, he might with propriety say, therewith they honor man. But I am persuaded he used the term in the first sense. See on Judges 9:13 (note).

#### Verse 11

But the fig tree said - Should I forsake my sweetness - The fruit of the fig tree is the sweetest or most luscious of all fruits. A full-ripe fig, in its own climate, has an indescribable sweetness; so much so that it is almost impossible to eat it, till a considerable time after it is gathered from the trees, and has gone through an artificial preparation. This I have often noticed.

#### Verse 13

Which cheereth God and man - I believe  $\text{x}\cdot\text{x}\cdot\text{x}\cdot\text{x}\cdot\text{x}$  (elohim) here is to be taken in the same sense proposed on Judges 9:9. Vast libations of wine, as well as much oil, were used in heathenish sacrifices and offerings; and it was their opinion that the gods actually partook of, and were delighted with, both the wine and oil. The pagan mythology furnishes the most exquisite wines to its gods in heaven, and hence the nectar and ambrosia so much talked of and praised by the ancients. It is not reasonable to suppose that Jotham makes any reference here to the sacrifices, oblations, and perfumes offered to the true God. This language the idolatrous Shechemites could scarcely understand. What could the worshippers of Baal-berith know of the worship of the God who gave his law to Moses? And it is not very likely that Jotham himself was well acquainted with the sacred rites of the Mosaic religion, as they had been little preached in his time.

#### Verse 14

Then said all the trees unto the bramble - The word  $\text{x}\cdot\text{x}\cdot\text{x}$  (atad), which we translate bramble, is supposed to mean the rhamnus, which is the largest of thorns, producing dreadful spikes, similar to darts. See Theodoret on Psalm 58:10. There is much of the moral of this fable contained in the different kinds of trees mentioned.

1. The olive; the most profitable tree to its owner, having few equals either for food or medicine.
2. The fig tree; one of the most fruitful of trees, and yielding one of the most delicious fruits, and superior to all others for sweetness.
3. The vine, which alone yields a liquor that, when properly prepared, and taken in strict moderation, is friendly both to the body and mind of man, having a most direct tendency to invigorate both.
4. The bramble or thorn, which, however useful as a hedge, is dangerous to come near; and is here the emblem of an impious, cruel, and oppressive king.

As the olive, fig, and vine, are said in this fable to refuse the royalty, because in consequence, they intimate, they should lose their own privileges, we learn that to be invested with power for the public good can be no privilege to the sovereign. If he discharge the office faithfully, it will plant his pillow with thorns, fill his soul with anxious cares, rob him of rest and quiet, and, in a word, will be to him a source of distress and misery. All this is represented here under the emblem of the trees losing their fatness, their sweetness and good fruits, and their cheering influence. In short, we see from this most sensible fable that the beneficent, benevolent, and highly illuminated mind, is ever averse from the love of power; and that those who do seek it are the thoughtless, the vain, the ambitious, and those who wish for power merely for the purpose of self-gratification; persons who have neither the disposition nor the knowledge to use power for the advantage of the community; and who, while they boast great things, and make great pretensions and promises, are the tyrants of the people, and often through their ambition, like the bramble in the fable kindle a flame of foreign or domestic war, in which their subjects are consumed. The sleepless nights and corroding cares of sovereignty, are most forcibly described by a poet of our own, whose equal in describing the inward workings of the human heart, in all varieties of character and circumstances, has never appeared either in ancient or modern times. Hear what he puts in the mouth of two of his care-worn kings: -

How many thousand of my poorest subjects  
 Are at this hour asleep? - Sleep, gentle sleep,  
 Nature's soft nurse! how have I frighted thee,  
 That thou no more wilt weigh my eyelids down,  
 And steep my senses in forgetfulness?  
 Why rather, sleep, liest thou in smoky cribs,  
 Upon uneasy pallets stretching thee,  
 And hush'd with buzzing night-flies to thy slumber  
 Than in the perfumed chambers of the great,  
 Under the canopies of costly state,  
 And lull'd with sounds of sweetest melody?  
 O thou dull god! why liest thou with the vile  
 In loathsome beds; and leav'st the kingly couch  
 A watch-case, or a common alarum bell?  
 Wilt thou upon the high and giddy mast  
 Seal up the ship-boy's eyes, and rock his brains  
 In cradle of the rude imperious surge;  
 And in the visitation of the winds,  
 Who take the ruffian billows by the top,  
 Curling their monstrous heads and hanging them,  
 With deafening clamours, in the slippery clouds,  
 That, with the hurly, death itself awakes?  
 Canst thou, O partial sleep! give thy repose  
 To the wet sea-boy, in an hour so rude;  
 And, in the calmest and most stillest night,  
 With all appliances and means to boot,  
 Deny it to a king? Then, happy low, lie down!  
 Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown. -

O hard condition! twin-born with greatness,  
 Subjected to the breath of every fool,  
 Whose sense no more can feel but his own wringing!  
 What infinite heart's ease must kings neglect,  
 That private men enjoy!  
 And what have kings, that privates have not too,  
 Save ceremony, save general ceremony? -

'Tis not the balm, the scepter, and the ball,  
 The sword, the mace, the crown imperial,  
 The intertissued robe of gold and pearl,  
 The farced title running afore the king,  
 The throne he sits on, nor the tide of pomp  
 That beats upon the high shore of this world,  
 No, not all these, thrice gorgeous ceremony,  
 Not all these, laid in bed majestical,  
 Can sleep so soundly as the wretched slave.  
 Shakespeare

This is precisely the sentiment expressed in the denial of the olive, fig tree, and vine.

#### Verse 15

Come and put your trust in any shadow - The vain boast of the would-be sovereign; and of the man who is seeking to be put into power by the suffrages of the people. All promise, no performance.

Let fire come out of the bramble - A strong catachresis. The bramble was too low to give shelter to any tree; and so far from being able to consume others, that the smallest fire will reduce it to ashes, and that in the shortest time. Hence the very transitory mirth of fools is said to be like the cracking of thorns under a pot. Abimelech was the bramble; and the cedars of Lebanon, all the nobles and people of Israel. Could they therefore suppose that such a low-born, uneducated, cruel, and murderous man, could be a proper protector, or a humane governor? He who could imbrue his hands in the blood of his brethren in order to get into power, was not likely to stop at any means to retain that power when possessed. If, therefore, they took him for their king, they might rest assured that desolation and blood would mark the whole of his reign. The condensed moral of the whole fable is this: Weak, worthless, and wicked men, will ever be foremost to thrust themselves into power; and, in the end, to bring ruin upon themselves, and on the unhappy people over whom they preside.

#### Verse 20

Let fire come out from Abimelech - As the thorn or bramble may be the means of kindling other wood, because it may be easily ignited; so shall Abimelech be the cause of kindling a fire of civil discord among you, that shall consume the rulers and great men of your country. A prophetic declaration of what would take place.

#### Verse 21

Went to Beer - Mr. Maundrell, in his journey from Aleppo to Jerusalem, p. 64, 5th edit., mentions a place of this name, which he thinks to be that to which Jotham fled, and supposed to be the same as Mishmash, 1 Samuel 14:5, 1 Samuel 14:31. It is situated, he says, towards the south, on an easy declivity; and has a fountain of excellent water at the bottom of the hill from which it has taken its name.

#### Verse 23

God sent an evil spirit - He permitted jealousies to take place which produced factions; and these factions produced insurrections, civil contentions, and slaughter.

#### Verse 25

The men of Shechem set liars in wait - It pleased God to punish this bad man by the very persons who had contributed to his iniquitous elevation. So God often makes the instruments of men's sins the means of their punishment. It is likely that although Abimelech had his chief residence at Shechem, yet he frequently went to Ophrah, the city of his father; his claim to which there was none to oppose, as he had slain all his brethren. It was probably in his passage between those two places that the Shechemites had posted cut-throats, in order to assassinate him; as such men had no moral principle, they robbed and plundered all who came that way.

#### Verse 26

Gaal the son of Ebed - Of this person we know no more than is here told. He was probably one of the descendants of the Canaanites, who hoped from the state of the public mind, and their disaffection to Abimelech, to cause a revolution, and thus to restore the ancient government as it was under Hamor, the father of Shechem.

#### Verse 28

Zebul his officer - (pekido), his overseer; probably governor of Shechem in his absence.

**Verse 29**

Would to God this people were under my hand - The very words and conduct of a sly, hypocritical demagogue.

Increase thine army, and come out - When he found his party strong, and the public feeling warped to his side, then he appears to have sent a challenge to Abimelech, to come out and fight him.

**Verse 31**

They fortify the city against thee - Under pretense of repairing the walls and towers, they were actually putting the place in a state of defense, intending to seize on the government as soon as they should find Abimelech coming against them. Fortifying the city may mean seducing the inhabitants from their loyalty to Abimelech.

**Verse 35**

Stood in the entering of the gate - Having probably got some intimation of the designs of Zebul and Abimelech.

**Verse 37**

By the plain of Meonenim - Some translate, by the way of the oaks, or oaken groves; others, by the way of the magicians, or regarders of the times, as in our margin. Probably it was a place in which augurs and soothsayers dwelt.

**Verse 45**

And sowed it with salt - Intending that the destruction of this city should be a perpetual memorial of his achievements. The salt was not designed to render it barren, as some have imagined; for who would think of cultivating a city? but as salt is an emblem of incorruption and perpetuity, it was no doubt designed to perpetuate the memorial of this transaction, and as a token that he wished this desolation to be eternal. This sowing a place with salt was a custom in different nations to express permanent desolation and abhorrence. Sigonius observes that when the city of Milan was taken, in a.d. 1162, the walls were razed, and it was sown with salt. And Brantome informs us that it was ancient custom in France to sow the house of a man with salt, who had been declared a traitor to his king. Charles IX., king of France, the most base and perfidious of human beings, caused the house of the Admiral Coligni (whom he and the Duke of Guise caused to be murdered, with thousands more of Protestants, on the eve of St. Bartholomew, 1572) to be sown with salt! How many houses have been since sown with salt in France by the just judgments of God, in revenge for the massacre of the Protestants on the eve of St. Bartholomew! Yet for all this God's wrath is not turned away, but his hand is stretched out still.

**Verse 46**

A hold of the house of the god Berith - This must mean the precincts of the temple, as we find there were a thousand men and women together in that place.

**Verse 53**

A piece of a millstone -  $\text{p}^{\text{e}}\text{l}\text{a}\text{c}\text{h}\text{r}\text{e}\text{c}\text{h}\text{e}\text{b}$  (pelach recheb), a piece of a chariot wheel; but the word is used in other places for upper millstones, and is so understood here by the Vulgate, Septuagint, Syriac, and Arabic.

And all to break his skull - A most nonsensical version of  $\text{v}\text{a}\text{t}\text{t}\text{a}\text{r}\text{i}\text{t}\text{s}\text{e}\text{t}\text{h}\text{g}\text{u}\text{l}\text{g}\text{o}\text{l}\text{t}\text{o}$  (vattarits eth gulgolto), which is literally, And she brake, or fractured, his skull. Plutarch, in his life of Pyrrhus, observes that this king was killed at the siege of Thebes, by a piece of a tile, which a woman threw upon his head.

**Verse 54**

Draw thy sword, and slay me - It was a disgrace to be killed by a woman; on this account, Seneca the tragedian deplores the death of Hercules: -

O turpe fatum! femina Herculeae necis

Autor feritur.

Herc. Oetaeus, ver. 1177.

â€œO dishonorable fate! a woman is reported to have been author of the death of Hercules.â€œ

Abimelech was also afraid that if he fell thus mortally wounded into the hands of his enemies they might treat him with cruelty and insult.

**Verse 56**

Thus God rendered, etc. - Both the fratricide Abimelech, and the unprincipled men of Shechem, had the iniquity visited upon them of which they had been guilty. Man's judgment may be avoided; but there is no escape

from the judgments of God.

I have said that the fable of Jotham is the oldest, and perhaps the best, in the world; and referred for other particulars to the end of the chapter.

On the general subject of fable, apologue, and parable, the reader will find a considerable dissertation at the end of Matthew 13:58; I shall add but a few things here, and they shall refer to the oldest collection of fables extant. These are of Indian origin, and are preserved in the Sanscreeet, from which they have been translated into different languages, both Asiatic and European, under various titles. The collection is called Hitopadesa, and the author Veshnoo Sarma; but they are known in Europe by The Tales and Fables of Bidpay, or Pilpay, an ancient Indian Philosopher. Of this collection Sir William Jones takes the following notice: - "The fables of Veshnoo Sarma, whom we ridiculously call Pilpay, are the most beautiful, if not the most ancient, collection of apologues in the world. They were first translated from the Sanscreeet, in the sixth century, by Buzerchumihr, or bright as the sun, the chief physician, and afterwards the vizir of the great Anushirwan; and are extant under various names, in more than twenty languages. But their original title is Hitopadesa, or amicable instruction; and as the very existence of Aesop, whom the Arabs believe to have been an Abyssinian, appears rather doubtful, I am not disinclined to suppose that the first moral fables which appeared in Europe were of Indian or Aethiopian origin."

Mr. Frazer, in his collection of Oriental MSS. at the end of his History of Nadir Shah, gives us the following account of this curious and instructive work: -

"The ancient brahmins of India, after a good deal of time and labor, compiled a treatise, (which they called Kurtuk Dumnik), in which were inserted the choicest treasure of wisdom and the most perfect rules for governing a people. This book they presented to their rajahs, who kept it with the greatest secrecy and care. About the time of Mohammed's birth or the latter end of the sixth century, Noishervan the Just, who then reigned in Persia, discovered a great inclination to see that book; for which purpose Burzuvia, a physician, who had a surprising talent in learning several languages, particularly Sanskerritt, was introduced to him as the most proper person to be employed to get a copy of it. He went to India, where, after some years' stay, and great trouble, he procured it. It was translated into the Pehluvi (the ancient Persian language) by him and Buzrjumehr, the vizir. Noishervan, ever after, and all his successors, the Persian kings, had this book in high esteem, and took the greatest care to keep it secret. At last Abu Jaffer Munsour zu Nikky, who was the second caliph of the Abassi reign, by great search got a copy of it in the Pehluvi language, and ordered Imam Hassan Abdal Mokaffa, who was the most learned of the age, to translate it into Arabic. This prince ever after made it his guide, not only in affairs relating to the government, but also in private life.

"In the year 380 of the Hegira, Sultan Mahmud Ghazi put into verse; and afterwards, in the year 515, by order of Bheram Shah ben Massaud, that which Abdal Mokaffa had translated was retranslated into Persic by Abdul Mala Nasser Allah Mustofi; and this is that Kulila Dumna which is now extant. As this latter had too many Arabic verses and obsolete phrases in it, Molana Ali beg Hessein Vaes, at the request of Emir Soheli, keeper of the seals to Sultan Hossein Mirza, put it into a more modern style, and gave it the title of Anuar Soheli.

"In the year 1002, the great moghul Jalal o Din Mohommed Akbar ordered his own secretary and vizir, the learned Abul Fazl, to illustrate the obscure passages, abridge the long digressions, and put it into such a style as would be most familiar to all capacities; which he accordingly did, and gave it the name of Ayar Danish, or the Criterion of Wisdom." This far Mr. Frazer, under the word Ayar Danish.

"In the year 1709," says Dr. Wilkins, "the Kulila Dumna, the Persian version of Abul Mala Nasser Allah Mustofi, made in the 515th year of the Hegira, was translated into French, with the title of Les Conseils et les Maximes de Pilpay, Philosophe Indien, sur les divers Etats de la Vie. This edition resembles the Hitopadesa more than any other then seen; and is evidently the immediate original of the English Instructive and entertaining Fables of Pilpay, an ancient Indian philosopher, which, in 1775, had gone through five editions.

"The Anuar Soheli, above mentioned, about the year 1540, was rendered into the Turkish language; and the translator is said to have bestowed twenty years' labor upon it. In the year 1724, this edition M. Galland began to translate into French, and the first four chapters were then published; but, in the year 1778, M. Cardonne completed the work, in three volumes, giving it the name of Contes et Fables Indiennes de Bidpai et de Lokman; traduites d'Ali Tcheleby ben Saleh, amateur Turk; "Indian Tales and Fables of Bidpay and Lockman, translated from Aly Tcheleby ben Saleh, a Turkish author."

The fables of Lockman were published in Arabic and Latin, with notes, by Erpenius, 4th. Amstel., 1636; and by the celebrated Golius, at the end of his edition of Erpenius's Arabic Grammar, Lugd. Bat., 1656, with additional notes; and also in the edition of the same Grammar, by Albert Schultens, Lugd. Bat., 1748, 4th. They are only thirty-seven in number.

Of the Hitopadesa, or fables of Veshnoo Sarma, we have two very elegant English translations from the original Sanscreeet: one by Sir William Jones, printed in his works, 4th., vol. 6, Lond. 1799; the other by the father of Sanscreeet literature in Europe, Dr. Charles Wilkins, of the India House, 8 vo., Bath, 1787, with a collection of very important notes.

The Bahar Danush, or Sea of Wisdom, abounds with maxims, apothegms, etc., similar to those in the preceding works; this was most faithfully translated from the Persian, by Dr. Jonathan Scott, late Persian secretary to his

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excellency Warren Hastings, published in three vols. 12 mo., with notes, Shrewsbury, 1799. This is the most correct version of any Persian work yet offered to the public. The original is by Einaut Ullah. Of these works it may be said, they contain the wisdom of the oriental world; and many of the numerous maxims interspersed through them yield in importance only to those in the sacred writings. The fables attributed to Aesop have been repeatedly published in Greek and Latin, as well as in all the languages of Europe, and are well known. Those of Phaedrus are in general only a metrical version of the fables of Aesop. The compositions of La Fontaine, in French, and those of Mr. Gay, in English, are very valuable.