

Jotham's Fable: Leadership Called to Serve (Judges 8:22-9:57)

Introduction

We, who are involved in Christian leadership in the various disciplines and professions, are called upon to think through basic leadership theory and practice. What does leadership mean in the context of a school administration, a business, church or missions agency? Further, what is specifically Christian about Christian leaders who manage personnel, work-flow, office management, and strategic planning? The workplace is chaotic, fraught with insecurity, layoffs, cut-backs, and stress, in an unstable national economy within a growing global marketplace. How are we as Christian leaders prepared for the 21st century to be fulfilled and productive? How do Christian values affect the way we as teachers, students, managers, administrators think about and model Christian leadership in the different professions?

Clearly, an older Machiavellian approach to leadership will not meet the needs of people in an insecure workplace; an autocratic leadership style is unbiblical, non-productive, and in the end, self-defeating. In our day, even from the secular community, there is a recognition of a different model, filled with heart and soul, in which leaders and workers alike share in a wholistic approach to the workplace. In business and public education there are new slogans such as total quality management, participative management, team-building, and customer satisfaction. There is a flood of new books that emphasize service to others in the context of empowerment.ⁱ

The Bible affirms a type of leadership that is service-oriented; leaders lead by serving and serve by leading. Indeed, this vocation belongs to the entire people of God. And for those of us who serve as Christian leaders, the mandate from the Bible, and even from the secular community, is *to educate and train servant-leaders through formal instruction and example*. Christian leaders are models and are invested with the wonderful opportunity of helping others learn how to help others in the various professions, and in helping others, they will lead. Thus, the Christian agenda in the workplace will need to model qualities such as trust, listening, purpose and meaning, respect, encouragement, and commitment.

The Bible offers us many models of leadership, both positive and negative, and the Bible intends that we profit from both types. Ultimately, the Bible offers us the most transparent model of the Servant Leader, Jesus Christ, who *came not to be served, but to serve, and give his life as a ransom for others* (Mk. 10:45).

What is offered in this article is an interpretation of a passage from the book of Judges that portrays in narrative form positive and negative role-models for leadership development. We have not chosen to offer a comprehensive picture from the Bible and extrapolate various texts that deal with servant leadership. Rather, we choose to let one narrative express an all-important lesson for us who are involved in Christian leadership. In each discipline and profession, we teach by example and we need to keep before us and our workers and colleagues *the paradigm of servant leadership*.

Thus, the reader is invited to read the paragraphs from Judges 8:22-9:47 in conjunction with the related interpretive remarks. In the application, we will relate the central message of the narrative to the leadership issues as we seek to prepare others with

a biblical approach to the various disciplines and professions. Where Hebrew is used, it is both transliterated and translated.

Introduction to Jotham's Fable

Cartoons and satire play a telling role in the political process of different countries. In the sphere of 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 highly controversial topic, a skilled artist is able to perceive the real issues. He then draws a caricature of the leading persons, which sums up the whole debate. Witness, for example, the numerous cartoons found in the newspapers during times such as Watergate or the Iran arms scandal. During the period of Desert Shield and Desert Storm in the Gulf War, cartoonists poked truthful humor at the leaders of the involved countries, particularly Saddam Hussein. 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 (Judg. 9:8-15). The fable and its application within its context points to *Israel's true servant calling* which was expressed in Israel's *Salvation History*. That history began with the call to Abraham.

In the call of Abraham (Gen. 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 on Jacob (that was stolen from Esau) 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" (Gen. 27:29). In Gen. 49:8-9, Jacob foretold the rule of Judah: "Your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies, your father's sons shall bow down before you." These texts and many others speak in terms of greatness, of superiority, and not of service.

Jotham's fable, with its political caricatures, contrasts the arrogant, self-serving, bramble (Abimelech) with the altruistic service of the olive-tree, fig-tree, and the vine (Israel), 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. It functions as a forerunner to the Servant of the Isaiah Songs and to the One who came not to be served but to serve (Mk. 10:45).

Judges 8:22-9:57 marks a turning point in the book. The fable and application together act as an interpretive hinge upon which the entire book turns. In the immediate context, Gideon (8:23) refuses the offer of kingship with these words: "I will not rule over you, nor shall my son rule over you; *the Lord shall rule over you (YHWH yimv)l b`iem*". "God alone," says Gideon, "is the ruler of his people. I am only a servant." His life is set in sharp contrast to Abimelech as the following episode shows. For Abimelech ruthlessly seizes the kingship after his fratricide (9:1-6), and Shechem is led into apostasy and destruction.

Jotham's fable (9:8-15) and application (9:16-21) function as the interpretive bridge between Gideon (hero) and Abimelech (villain) including the subsequent falling out and destruction of Abimelech and the men of Shechem. The Gideon episode, the

fratricide of Abimelech, and Jotham's fable (with application) all combine to reveal the writer's serious doubts concerning an autocratic leadership and monarchy as well as his deep conviction that the people of God and their leadership are here to serve--not to rule. This fable is set within the context of a book that depicts the cruelty and duplicity of the life of the Israelite confederacy and exposes the shambles that the people of God make of their calling to service.

The Larger and Immediate Context of Judges 8:22-9:57

The book of Judges demonstrates the progressive chaos of the national and spiritual life of Israel summarized by the repeated editorial observation, "In those days there was no king in Israel: every man did what was right in his own eyes,"¹ and the repeated claim that "the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord."² In the midst of such chaos, judges are raised up to effect deliverance. "The person upon whom the Spirit falls is called a judge,"³ *i.e.*, a defender of Israel against her enemies. To this type of deliverer, Max Weber gave the name, "charismatic leader."⁴

In terms of the *immediate context*, the Abimelech episode falls within the central section of the book (2:6-16:31), which unfolds the stories of the various judges. The editor does not give Abimelech the title of judge but depicts him as "a man of perdition,"⁵ an arch-enemy of God and His people. It is not said of him that he judged (v`P`f) but that he was made king (9:6) and that "he reigned" (*wayy`car* - 9:22).

Structural Analysis

In order to properly interpret Jotham's fable, the prologue (8:22-35) has been included with the whole of chapter 9. With the fable and application serving as the interpretive hinge for the whole, we suggest the following headings of this block of material:

Prologue (Judg. 8:22-35): The ideal of service seen in Gideon (hero)

Historical Section (9:1-6): Gideon's antithesis seen in Abimelech

(villain)

Introduction to Abimelech's Speech (9:1)

Abimelech's Speech (9: 2)

Response to Abimelech's Speech (9:3-5)

Coronation and Setting of Stage for Fable (9:6)

Jotham's Fable (9:7-17)

Introduction to Fable (9:7)

Fable:

Offer and Refusal of Kingship (9:8-13)

Offer and Acceptance of Kingship (9:14-15)

¹17:6; 21:25; compare 18:1; 19:1; 21:25.

²2:11; 3:7, 12; 4:1; 6:1; 10:6; 13:1.

³John L. McKenzie, *The World of the Judges* (Englewood Cliffs, 1966), p. 16. cf. John Bright, *A History of Israel* (3rd edn, Philadelphia, 1966), p. 159 for a similar position. George F. Moore, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Judges (ICC)* (Edinburgh, 1976), p. 239. Martin Noth *The History of Israel*, (2nd edn, New York, 1960), pp. 85-109.

⁴Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, transl. by Ephraim Fischhoff (Boston, 1922), p. 81.

⁵Georges Auzou, *La Force de l'Esprit* (Paris: 'Editions de l'Orante, 1965), p. 255.

Application of Jotham's Fable (9:16-21)
Interpretation of Fable (9:16-18)
Prophetic Message of Fable (9:19-20)
Wrap-up (9:21)
Abimelech/Shechemite Falling-Out (9:22-55)
Abimelech's rule and its violent end
Moral (9:56-57)

Interpretation

Prologue (Judges 8:22-35): *The Ideal of Servant Leadership Seen in Gideon (hero)*

The *prologue* connects the Abimelech episode with the Gideon saga(s) (Judg. 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 (YHWH yimv)l b`k@m* - 8:23). His refusal lies in sharp contrast to the following demand by Abimelech for kingship, a demand that he promotes by the murder of his brothers.

The one black mark upon Gideon's career is the erection of an ephod which became *a snare (l =moq@v)* to him and his household (8:27). 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).

Historical Section (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*" (*wayy@lei* - consec. impf.). The form connects the story with the prologue,⁶ *i.e.*, Gideon's refusal of kingship, building of the ephod⁷ and subsequent apostasy, his seventy sons (8:30, 31), and *his concubine (W[lagvo)*, who bore to him Abimelech.

The name Abimelech, technically means, "my father (that is to say, YHWH) is king."⁸ The verb *reign, m`lai*, so frequent in Kings and Chronicles, occurs with reference to Israel, only in ch. 9 (cf. Judg. 4:2 - "Jabin, king of Canaan *reigned*"). In ch. 9, the verb is found as an imperative (9:8, 10, 12, 14) and in the indicative (mood of fact) (9:6, 16, 18), all in reference to Abimelech. Furthermore, the noun *king, melel*, occurs with reference to Israel and Abimelech only in Judges 9:6, 8, 15, and in the expression "there

⁶Haag, Simpson, Martin, 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), p. 312; Cuthbert Aikmann Simpson, Composition of the Book of Judges (Oxford, 1967), p. 41; James Martin, The Book of Judges (London, 1975), p. ; Barnabas Lindars, "Gideon and Kingship," JTS 16 (1965), pp. 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).

⁷Burney believes that the presence of *wayyaX@g* in 8:27 points to the establishment of an Ephod-Cult in Ophrah. C.F. Burney, The Book of Judges and the Book of Kings (New York, 1970), p. 241. See also John Gray, Joshua, Judges, and Ruth (NCB) (Greenwood, S.C., 1952), p. 241.

⁸Albert Vincent, Le Livre des Juges (Paris, 1958), p. 79.

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 ch. 9) is juxtaposed to the root verb three times, "to make Abimelech king" (9:6, 16, 18)?

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 on a two-fold argument:

- 1) monarchy is more efficient than oligarchy,
- 2) family obligations demand it.

Abimelech comes to Shechem and speaks to the whole *clan, mivpajat*, of his mother, so that they can reason with the leaders of Shechem.⁹ It appears that Gideon, at Ophrah, valued Shechem, since he had married a Shechemite.¹⁰ Abimelech requests his relatives to speak on his behalf, *speak now in the hearing of (dabb=rW-n`a b=aozn?)* to the leaders or *proprietors of Shechem (baUal? v=iem)*.¹¹ 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?

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."¹² 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'."¹³ Abimelech's apparent concern for efficiency and family obligation is merely a smoke screen for his real intent, to seize the reins of power. Accordingly, he describes "the state of affairs as unfavorably as possible to the Shechemites."¹⁴

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

⁹On the importance of Shechem in this period cf. W. H. Irwin, "Le sanctuaire central israelite avant l'etablissement de la monarchie," RB (Avril, 1965), pp. 170-175; John Skinner, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis (ICC) (Edinburgh, 1963), pp. 421-422; G. A. Smith, The Historical Geography of the Holy Land (London, 1902), pp. 323-341; Moore, Judges, p. 240; Hugo Gressmann, Die Anfänge Israels (Göttingen, 1914), p. 218.

¹⁰cf. Gressmann, p. 218; Friedrich Notscher, Die Heilige Schrift (Wurzburg, 1965), p. 688, for the friendly relationship.

¹¹Burney, p. 270; Moore, Judges, p. 241; Le P.M.J. Lagrange, Le Livre des Juges (Paris, 1930), p. 164. (Similar use in 1 Sam. 23:11, 12; 2 Sam. 21:21).

¹²Vincenz Zapletal, Das Buch der Richter (Münster in Westf., 1923), p. 141.

¹³W. Robertson Smith, The Religion of the Semites (New York, 1956), p. 274; Roland de Vaux, Ancient Israel: Social Institutions (New York, 1965), p. 5. On the *sadiqu* marriage, cf. W. Robertson Smith, Kinship and Marriage (London, 1903), p. 77.

¹⁴Karl Budde, Das Buch der Richter (KAT), (Freiburg, 1897), p. 71.

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."¹⁵

The seventy shekels (one for each life) are taken from the temple treasury of Baal-Berith (El-Berith in v. 46),¹⁶ and a bodyguard of worthless and reckless men (cf. 11:3; 1 Sam. 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-guard, Abimelech goes to his father's home in Ophrah and murders his seventy brothers (cf. also 2 Kings 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."¹⁷ The phrase, *upon one stone* (*Ual -aeben aej`t*), repeated in Jotham's speech (9:18) may suggest a sacrificial slaughter,¹⁸ and may well prefigure the *lex talionis* ("law of just revenge") narrated in 9:53 where an upper millstone crushes Abimelech's skull. Just as Abimelech kills seventy brothers upon one stone, so he is killed by a stone (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 (Gen. 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."¹⁹

Coronation and Setting of Stage for Fable (9:6). After the fratricide is accomplished, the Shechemites assemble together with all *Beth-Millo*, (*b?t milloa*)²⁰ 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, the 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, 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.

Jotham's Fable (9:7-17)

Introduction to Fable: (9:7). This section opens with the words, *and they told it to Jotham* (4:7).²¹ Of what is Jotham informed? Not the slaughter of his brothers which

¹⁵Edward Nielsen, *Shechem: A Traditio-Historical Investigation* (Copenhagen, 1959), p. 145.

¹⁶Moore, p. 242. Moore regards these as equivalent: places with el as the numen loci and baal as god proprietor of the place. cf. also Georg Fohrer, *History of Israelite Religion* (Nashville, 1972), p. 48.

¹⁷Zapletal, p. 142.

¹⁸Ernst Sellin, *Wie Wurde Sichem eine Israelitische Stadt?* (Leipzig, 1922), p. 26; Arthur Cundall, *Judges: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downer's Groves, 1968), p. 127; Robert Boling, *Judges (AB)* (New York, 1975), p. 171.

¹⁹Eugene Maly, "The Jotham Fable - Anti-Monarchial?", *CBQ* 22 (1960), p. 300.

²⁰There is much to favor the meaning of citadel for Beth-Millo (Ha-Millo in 2 Sam 5:9; 1 Kgs. 9: 15, 24; 11:27; 2 Chron. 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). cf. Burney, p. 272.

²¹Nielsen notes how the verb *n`g`d* contains the idea of "informing" or "betraying" which is "almost the leitmotif of this whole story; cf vv. 29-31, v. 25; vv. 46." p. 146.

Jotham knew all too well, but rather the day of Abimelech's coronation (v. 19),²² *i.e.*, a time later than the massacre in Ophrah. 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,²³ where he can be seen, heard, and recognized, but at a distance which will not endanger himself.

Fable: Offer and Refusal of Kingship (9:8-13). The fable begins with the words, *Once the trees went forth*²⁴ *to anoint a king to rule over them*. Immediately, we encounter 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."²⁵ It is possible, however, that the expression hints at a pro-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* (*m`vaj*), is used of a king. True, *m`vaj* is found frequently with reference to the consecration of priests, but not of kings²⁶ and it is seen as a rejection of Yahweh's rule. The anointing here is seen as the means of investiture with the royal office, "the setting apart of its subject."²⁷

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.²⁸ The horticultural trio refuse 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, which has a positive value for God and humans:

²²Moshe Weinfield, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School* (Oxford, 1972), p. 176; Nielsen, p. 146.

²³Zapletal recounts his own experience of speaking and shouting on Mt. Gerizim, p. 145. cf. W. M. Thomson, *The Land and the Book*, Vol. II, (New York, 1859), pp. 209-210.

²⁴lit., "going, they went" (h`lok h`l=kW), with the infinitive absolute preceding the main verb and carries little emphasis. GKC, 113o.

²⁵Burney, p. 275. The use of the fable in the OT is confined to political situations (2 Kgs. 14:9; Ezek. 17). Scholars have cited parallels from the "contest literature" of Babylonian wisdom stories: W. G. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* (Oxford, 1960), p. 150. Others have noted parallels from Sumerian disputation speech: Willy Schottroff, "Das Weinberglied Jesajas (Jes. 5:1-7)" ZAW, 82, (1970), p. 86. J. A. Van Dijk, *La Sagesse Sumero-Accadienne* (Leiden, 1953), p. 12 f. B. Landsberger, "Jahreszeiten in Sumerisch-Akkadischen," JNES VIII, (1949), pp. 259ff. Far parallels in Egyptian literature cf. Hermann Ranke, *Aegypten*. (Tubingen, 1923), p. 429ff. The closest parallel is found in the Words of Ahikar, A. Cowley, *Aramaic Papyri of the Fifth Century* (Oxford, 1923), p. 224.

²⁶von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, Vol. I, pp. 324-327. Von Rad rightly distinguishes between the earlier promonarchical 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.

²⁷Gray, p. 244. Kutsch draws parallels with the Egyptian custom of anointing the Pharaoh. Ernst Kutsch, *Salbung als Rechtsakt* (Berlin, 1963), pp. 56-7. De Vaux points to the existence of anointing prior to the monarchy in Canaanite practice. Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Religious Institutions* (New York, 1965).

²⁸Treuer notes, "Use of the tree and its fruit for food, fuel, light, carpentry, ointments, medicines, etc., touched almost every phase of daily life." J. C. Trever, "Olive-Tree", IDB, Vol. III, p. 596. Zapletal comments from Columella *de re rustica* V, 8: "Olea . . . prima omnium arborum est.", p. 146. cf. George Adam Smith, *Jerusalem* (London, 1907), pp. 299-302 for a description of this tree's importance. For the fig-tree and bibliography cf. J. C. Trever, "Fig-Tree", IDB, Vol. IV, pp. 784-7. On the poetry and rhythm cf. Eduard Sievers, *Metrische Studien* (Leipzig, 1901), pp. 388-389; J. W. Rothstein, "Jotham's Fable (Jud. 9, 7-15) rhythmisch-kritisch behandelt", ZA 26 (1912), pp. 22-9.

Fruit-bearing plant or tree	Reason for refusal of kingship
"the olive-tree" (<i>hazzayit</i>)--v. 8	"my fatness (<i>divn'</i>) which by me glorifies God"--v. 9
"the fig-tree" (<i>hatt=a@n`h</i>)--v. 10	"my sweetness and my good good fruit" (<i>motq' w=aet-t=nubati hattobah</i>)--v. 11
"the vine" (<i>haggepen</i>)--v. 12	"my new wine (<i>tiroso</i>) which cheers gods and men"--v. 13

The beneficent quality, explicit in the olive-tree and vine, *i.e.*, to gods and men, is also implicit in the fig-tree. The sweetness and good fruit 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.

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* (*n>au*) 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",²⁹ "authority over subjects to obey his beck and nod."³⁰ 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 "waving over the trees?"

Fable: Offer and Acceptance of Kingship (9:14-15). Since a king could not be found among the fruit-trees, *all* (*kol*) the trees went in a desperate search for a candidate, and found one in the *buck thorn*, or *bramble* (*a`f d*). The bramble (Lat. *rhamnus*) 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 scrub 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?³¹

The relationship of v. 15 to v. 18 is established by three individual terms: *to anoint, over them, a king*. The fable's message 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.

The consequences of the bramble's election will either mean complete obedience or total destruction. Again, we sense irony in the conditional *if* (*a im*), meaning the trees

²⁹Gray, p. 244.

³⁰Wolfgang Richter, *Traditionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zum Richterbuch* (Bonn, 1963), p. 250.

³¹*Ibid.*, p. 285.

have not acted in good faith in making the bramble king, and therefore destruction will follow: destruction of the trees in v. 15 and of the bramble as well (v. 20).

The fable is directed to the men of Shechem and portrays the positive and negative nature of leadership. Positively, the call of true leaders, representative of the people of God, means service to God and the community. Negatively, leadership or "kingship" means arrogance, selfishness, deceptiveness and self-destruction.

While the search of the trees for a king does not tally with the historical section (9:1-6), it does agree with the former offer of kingship to 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? Truly, God is their foundation and their call is service to Him and to His community. In the application which follows, we see Jotham reapply the message of the fable to his audience with a new twist.

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

Interpretation of Fable (9:16-18). The words *and now*, (*w=Uatt`h*), in v. 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 (bea \$met - v. 15), and in integrity" (>bu t`m'm)*. In v. 15, the question concerned the good faith of the people to their new king, while the application pointedly questions their good faith to Jerubbaal. The word *if (aim)*, 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".³² "The triple protasis ("if clauses" in vss. 16, 19a) is separated from its apodosis ("then" clause, v. 19b) by a parenthetic review of Jerubbaal's deserts and the sins of the Shechemites."³³ The awkwardness of the link between v. 15b and v. 16 has led some interpreters to suggest that vss. 16b-19a are a later addition.³⁴ 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."³⁵

In the application, Jotham both *interprets* and *prophesies*. He *interprets* what has taken place in the slaughter of his brothers as well as in the coronation of the useless/dangerous half-brother Abimelech. Then he proceeds to *prophecy* what will happen, *i.e.*, the mutual destruction of the Shechemites and Abimelech.

³²Nielsen, p. 152.

³³Moore, p. 251.

³⁴Burney, p. 275; Moore, pp. 250-251; Boling, pp. 123-174; Hans Wilhelm Hertzberg, *Die Bücher Joshua, Richter, Ruth* (Gottingen, 1959), p. 205; Frederick Eiselen, *The Abingdon Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1929), p. 366.

³⁵Zapletal, p. 149.

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 (Judg. 6-8) by *risking his own life* (*wayyavl@k aet-na[v] minneged*, lit. *he cast his life before*), *i.e. He hazarded his life* (9:17) and by fighting for them with a disinterestedness for his own security (*Ual?;em - on your behalf*). Abimelech, however, abetted by the Shechemites, had disregarded Jerubbaal's sacrificial service and murdered his seventy sons.

Prophetic Message of 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 prophecy of destruction, *i.e.*, a curse. 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.³⁶

Verse 20 makes it clear that *fire* (*a@v*) 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 over. The way is open for God's intervention through a falling out of Abimelech and the Shechemites.

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

Jotham's prophecy of mutual destruction, effected through a 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).

In vss. 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). The Shechemites are defeated (vss. 39-41) and the city is captured, destroyed by fire, and sown with salt (vss. 42-49).³⁷

From vss. 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 armour-bearer to avoid the ignominy of perishing at the hand of a woman. The reference to the *mill stone* (v. 53) is a vivid reminder of the *one stone* (vss. 5, 18) where the fratricide occurred.

The Moral (9:56, 57)

³⁶Maly, p. 304. cf. also Hermann Gunkel, *Das Marchen im Alten Testament*, II (Tubingen, 1921), p. 18.

³⁷cf. A. M. Honeyman, "The Salting of Shechem", *VT* 4 (1954), pp. 192-5; Stanley Gevirtz, "Jericho and Shechem", *VT* 13 (1963), pp. 52-62; F. Charles Fensham, "Salt as Curse in the Old Testament", *BA* 25 (1962), pp. 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, 1979), p. 200ff.

The moral of the story is found in vss. 56, 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 curse is carried out by God, *i.e.*, God sent an evil spirit. The people of God and their evil neophyte ruler have made a shambles of their call to service. Secondary causes are thereby overlooked and the focus of editorial concern falls on the direct activity of God. 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 ruler who forsook their calling to service.

Summary

Von Rad notes that "Jotham's fable is designated the most forthright anti-monarchical poem in world literature."³⁸ 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), *recognize that God is the foundation of their life: "Yahweh shall rule"* (8:23). Correspondingly, *the people of God*, represented by their ruler, *are to seek after service to God and the community* rather than power. Gideon and the trio of olive-tree, fig-tree and vine function as examples of service, while Abimelech and the men of Shechem serve as examples of those who are self-seeking, deceitful, murderous, and in the end, self-destructive. The people of God should serve and not grasp for power. This is the unique message of the fable. Though the story is depicted with a graphic realism, the story has another "hidden hero, namely God",³⁹ 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. Abimelech and the men of Shechem die their respective deaths, not only because of their evil motives and actions, but because their self-seeking principle must die as well. The moral of Judges 8-9 is an appeal to the pathway of service which brings joy to God and sustenance to his people (Judg. 9:11, 13) which appears against the dark backdrop of a selfish thrust for power and authority. It is the exact parallel to the masterful lesson that Jesus gives to his disciples. Against the background of the request of James and John for positions of power comparable to Roman rulers and their exercise of power, Jesus raises into prominence the self-giving life of the *diakonos* and the pattern of service that He himself manifests, even to giving his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10: 35-45).

Application to Christian Leadership

³⁸von Rad, Vol. II, p. 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 Vol. 13, (1963), p. 156. cf. also Zvi Adar, *The Biblical Narrative*, (Jerusalem, 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), pp. 315-326; A. E. Cundall, "Judges--An Apology for the Monarchy", ET 81 (1970), pp. 178-181.

³⁹Adar, p. 15

The application to leaders in the various professions should be clear; that of exemplifying and teaching the pathway of service in the various disciplines and professions. On the one hand, there is a warning, *If the servant leaders (portrayed by Gideon, olive-tree, fig-tree, and vine) do not serve in a leadership capacity, then the inferior members of the community (portrayed by Abimelech and the bramble) will rise to autocratic leadership, abuse people, and lead to self-destruction.* In a positive vein, servant leaders and their mentors should see *the wonderful privilege of serving the community by responsible leadership.*

We took a poll from some of our colleagues in the various schools of Regent University and asked the question, *What would a servant leader look like in your profession?* The following answers were given:

School of Business: "A servant leader businessperson would be evident by what (s)he shows in action to be the highest priority: to keep close to a leadership team in order to be sure each member had sufficient materials, manpower, time, authority, and coaching support to accomplish the agreed goals that appeared in his job description, consistent with the organization's vision and mission."⁴⁰

School of Education: "Servant leaders for the 90's in the teaching profession enable others to be successful. Servant leaders facilitate the grass roots process, foster growth and development in teachers, parents, and children. Without a service-orientation, teachers either become too authoritative or overly permissive, and demonstrate less than desirable results."⁴¹

School of Counseling: "A counselor who is a people helper, is honest, compassionate, sensitive, and spiritually mature, a listener, reflector, a teacher, knowledgeable in practice and techniques, who allows the Holy Spirit to transmit healing and grace to a client."⁴²

School of Divinity: "Servant pastors and church leaders are not limited to the call of meeting everyone's needs. They are committed to initiate vision and strategies that equip others, help form and establish team relationships, and attach value to the lives and ministries of both their own people and the people of God in their community."⁴³

School of Government: "A Christian servant leader in government, politics, and policy-making, is devoted to truth in public affairs as revealed in the Bible. In the world, the servant leader is spiritually sensitive and responsive to the needs of peoples and nations, knowledgeable of practical strategies, and effective in implementing good government."⁴⁴

School of Communication: "Christian media professionals, artists, educators, and professional communication specialists demonstrate their servant leadership by using their communication gifts to promote truth and the Jewish and Christian world view revealed in the Bible."⁴⁵

My colleagues affirm the need for properly educated and trained servant leaders who approach their profession with the attitude, *What can I do to help in my profession?* Attitude means everything. People know, almost intuitively, whether their leader is there

⁴⁰Dan Chamberlin, School of Business, Regent University.

⁴¹Alan Arroyo, School of Education, Regent University.

⁴²Rosemarie Hughes, School of Counseling, Regent University.

⁴³Joe Umidi, School of Divinity, Regent University.

⁴⁴John Munday, Robertson School of Government, Regent University.

⁴⁵Bill Brown, School of Communication, Regent University.

to help them, in any discipline. Elementary school children need to know from their teachers that they are in the classroom to help them succeed in their education. Counselors must sense that their counselor is listening with a commitment to understand and help them walk through their unresolved and protracted problems. Workers in a business office are happier and more productive when their manager approaches the office with a team approach and a genuine spirit of helpfulness. In a church setting, a pastor is charged with the wonderful task of helping the people of God discover and use their gifts for the well being and witness of their church.

The short vignette, afforded to us in the book of Judges, through both hero and villain, offers us as Christian leaders, both an old and new paradigm. The paradigm is old in that the servant model encompasses both testaments, and new, in that it is 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).

iStewardship: Choosing Service Over Self-Interest, Reawakening the Spirit in Work: The Power of Dharmic Management, The Healing Manager: How to Build Quality Relationships and Productive Cultures at Work; See also Chris Lee, Rom Zemke, "The Search for Spirit in the Workplace", Training, (June, 1993), p. 22.