

Bible Studies in the book of Judges
Judges 8:29-9:57 – Abimelech, the man who would be king

In the past few days, we've had the news of the death of Sean Connery. Connery is, to many people, the premiere James Bond. But he played many other roles in his long career. One of the earliest non-Bond movies I remember seeing him in was *The Man Who Would Be King*, a movie based on Rudyard Kipling's 1888 novella of the same name. Connery played alongside Michael Caine (one of my other all-time-favourite actors) as a pair of rogue ex-soldiers from the British Army who set off from late 19th Century India in search of adventure, and ended up in Kafiristan, where one of them is mistaken for a god, and made their king. I won't spoil the ending for you if you haven't seen it, in case you ever do decide to watch it. But the title gives a clue: it's about a man (not a god, then) who "would be" (i.e. wanted to be, or tried to be) king.

Abimelech is another man who would be king. This is his story ...

Read Judges 8:29-35

1. What do you make of Gideon's family situation?
2. Names are often important in the Bible and in Jewish culture. Consider some of the names here ..
 - a. Gideon is also given the name Jerubbaal. Why? What does this name mean, and why was he given it (see Judges 6:32)? What does that tell us about Gideon's loyalties?
 - b. When Gideon died, the people turned to Baal-berith as their god. This name means "Baal of the covenant." What does that tell us about where their loyalties lie?
 - c. Abimelech means "my father is king." Was Gideon king (see Judges 8:22-23)? Why do you think he named his son this?
3. We are familiar with a pattern that has developed through the book thus far: Israel sins; things go wrong; they cry out to God; he raises up a judge to save them; the judge dies; the cycle begins again. What is different this time, and what might we learn from it?

Read Judges 9:1-21

4. What is Abimelech's proposition (verses 1-2)? Why is it accepted?
5. From where does Shechem acquire the money for Abimelech? What might this tell us about the influence behind Abimelech's throne?
6. Places, like names, are important in this story. Abimelech was born in Shechem (8:31), and it becomes his power base - whereas Gideon's family home was at Ophrah (8:32). Shechem is a place with great significance for Israel. It figured in the lives of Abraham, Jacob and Joseph. It was a town set aside for the Levites, and was a town of refuge, where someone who accidentally killed another could seek sanctuary (see Josh 21:21). Most importantly, it was at Shechem that Joshua renewed Israel's covenant relationship with the Lord (Joshua 24:25), meaning that Shechem was a name that had connotations for Israel's covenant with God. Thus, what happens in Shechem in this story is a complete distortion of everything

Shechem has previously stood for. Jotham delivers his parable from another important place, Mount Gerizim (9:7). What significance do you think this has (see Deuteronomy 27:11-26)?

7. How would you summarize the meaning of Jotham's parable (verses 7-15)?

Read Judges 9:20-57

8. How does what happened at the towers of Shechem and Thebez (verses 49, 52) fit with Jotham's curse in verse 20? What is the writer's conclusion (verse 57)?
9. What is fitting about the way Abimelech died (verses 46-49; 5, 18)? What does the writer make of this (verse 56)?

Reflect

10. What is God's role and purpose in all these events (see verses 23-24, 56-57)? What light does Galatians 6:7 shed on this, for example?
11. What do we learn about bad leadership from these events (see 2 Timothy 2:23-25; James 3:14-16)?
12. What sort of leaders should we look for, or try to be (see 1 Samuel 13:14; Mark 10:35-45; Philippians 2:1-10)?