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JOTHAM'S FABLE
Its Structure and Function in Judges 9

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In a 1973 article,[1] Barnabas Lindars demonstrated clearly that the "curse" in Judg 9.20—the final component in the application of Jotham's fable in vv 8-20—played a key role in the entire Abimelech narrative in Judges 9. The so-called "curse" which Jotham pronounced makes use of the final element of the fable in v 14 and links with the concluding verses to hold the chapter together. In between, the story moves to show how that curse was fulfilled.

This article will examine the structure of the fable recorded in vv 8-15 together with its relationship to the application which follows in vv 16-20, and will explore further the rhetorical function which these two sections have in the chapter as a whole. The intention is to demonstrate how the fable is central to the account of retribution meted out upon Abimelech and his supporters in Shechem; it sets out the theme of mutual destruction, the outcome of divine punishment.

The article first notes the cohesiveness of the chapter as expressed in its key terms and rhetorical features. Then consideration is given to the structure of the fable in vv 8-15 and how that structure is applied in vv 16-20. Finally a suggestion is made as to how the fable and its application indicate what the central purpose of the Abimelech story is.

Rhetorical elements—keywords

T.A. Boogaart[2] has drawn attention to the correspondence between the opening scene of "death upon a stone" (v 5) and Abimelech's death in the final scene as he lies mortally wounded by a stone (v 53). The keyword "stone" however, is only one rhetorical component among several which serve to bind the story together. Others have been noted by Janzen.[3] He first points to the use of the numeral "one" in 9.2, the reference to the "one stone" in 9.5, and its recurrence at the end of the story in 9.53 with the "one (a certain) woman" who despatches Abimelech.

1 Barnabas Lindars, "Jotham's Fable—A New Form-Critical Analysis," *Journal of Theological Studies* 24 (1973) 355-366.

2 T.A. Boogaart, "Stone for Stone: Retribution in the Story of Abimelech and Shechem," *JSOT* 32 (1985) 45-56.

3 J. Gerald Janzen, "A Certain Woman in the Rhetoric of Judges 9," *JSOT* 38 (1987) 32-37.

More could be made of the use of numerals as rhetorical devices in this story. There are two numerals which feature throughout the chapter—"seventy" (vv 2, 4, 5, 18, 24, 56); and "one" (vv 2, 5, 37, 53). What their particular significance as numerals might be is difficult to assess, yet what seems to be important rhetorically is the deliberate contrast between the "seventy" brothers killed and the "one" stone upon which they died. It is that element of contrast which the two numerals appear to represent throughout the story.

In addition to the two numerals, another keyword serves to demonstrate further the unity of the chapter. That keyword is *ro'sh*, variously meaning "head," "group," and "mountain top." It appears in vv 7, 25, 34, 36, 37, 43, 44(x2), 53 and 57. Its range of meanings allows it to serve as another binding element for the story as well as to hint at the final denouement when Abimelech is struck on the head and mortally wounded while the evil of the Shechemite leaders also falls (like a stone) upon their heads.

The above keywords provide the basic rhetorical elements which indicate the link between the opening and closing scenes of the chapter. They serve as thematic connectors in describing a dastardly crime which is eventually punished.

The reference to "stone" in v 5 may be an allusion to the means by which justice would be meted out upon Abimelech. However, this possible allusion is not as obvious as Boogaart would have us believe, for the "stone" of v 5 is not the same Hebrew term as used in v 53. Nevertheless, the hint is probably present from the outset.

Of course, there is a further keyword in the use of *melek* ("king"). This root is found in Abimelech's name ("my father is king") as well as in his role as king over Shechem. There is certainly a strong element of irony in the name of this central character whose father had rejected the offer of kingship. Abimelech was clearly misnamed; he was not in any sense the "son of the king."

Structure of the Jotham fable

The following schematic presentation of the main elements of the discourse highlights its carefully constructed form:

v 8 The trees once went forth to anoint a king over them;
And they said to the olive tree
Reign over us.
v 9 But the olive tree said to them
Shall I leave...and go to sway over the trees?
v 10 And the trees said to the fig tree
Come...and reign over us
v 11 But the fig tree said to them
Shall I leave...and go to sway over the trees?
v 12 And the trees said to the vine
Come...and reign over us
v 13 But the vine said to them
Shall I leave...and go to sway over the trees?
v 14 Then all the trees said to the bramble
Come...and reign over us

v 15 But the bramble said to them
IF in good faith you are anointing me king...
THEN come and take refuge...
BUT IF NOT, let fire come out...and devour...

The above outline demonstrates how the fable falls into four sub-sections following the introduction which sets the scene in v 8a. The sub-sections are:

vv 8b-9c invitation to the olive tree and its response
vv 10-11c invitation to the fig tree and its response
vv 12-13c invitation to the vine and its response
vv 14-15 invitation to the bramble and its response

The pattern established in the first three sub-sections is:

i) the trees invite one of their members to be king
ii) the invitee responds with
iii) a rhetorical question rejecting the trees' offer

This speech pattern and the vocabulary used in each of the above sub-sections are largely identical. Furthermore, these patterns continue into the fourth sub-section (vv 14-15). However, there the pattern is incomplete; it breaks off at its mid-point. That is to say, vv 14-15a begin in the same manner and with the same expressions as the previous three sub-sections, but the bramble's response (v 15c) interrupts the pattern. In place of a rhetorical question rejecting the offer of leadership (item iii above), a pair of conditional clauses is used. They signal possible acceptance of the offer made, in contrast to the previous rejection of the offer of leadership. Two features—this breaking of an established rhetorical pattern, and the fact that the trees' offer is made not to a valued member of the forest family but to a bramble (that is to say, a content variation)—have a significant rhetorical function. They indicate that this is the most important part, the rhetorical climax or focus of Jotham's presentation.

Regardless of what the fable may or may not have meant in its presumed earlier form and setting, in its present context v 15 declares its role as the focus of attention. It is beside the point to then note that Abimelech was not actually offered the throne. It is just as pointless to ask who the fir, olive and vine represent. Vv 8b-13 have served their rhetorical purpose and now can be largely forgotten, for the storyteller has brought the reader/hearer to v 15b and indicated both formally and stylistically as well as by a contrasting content feature that what is of utmost importance is the response of the bramble to the trees' offer of leadership.

The form of the bramble's response consists, as has been said, of two conditional clauses, the one positive ("If") and the other negative ("If not"). Those two features together with their associated vocabulary and phraseology recur throughout the application which Jotham makes in vv 16-20. Thus the elements of v 15 serve as the structuring basis for vv 16-20.

This observation will obviously have an impact on how the purpose of the fable and the chapter as a whole is understood. It will become clear that the primary focus for the chapter is not upon kingship as such, but upon the mutual conflict between Abimelech and the men of Shechem. However, that conclusion arises out of a study of the application of the pattern of v 15 throughout vv 16-20.

Formal features of Judges 9.15

The fourth sub-section of the fable begins in familiar fashion in v 14: the trees invite the bramble to lead them. V 15 continues with the second of the three elements forming the pattern for these sub-sections: the bramble responds. However, in the form and content of its response the bramble introduces another element. Rather than rejecting the trees' offer by means of a rhetorical question, the bramble responds with two conditional clauses ("If in good faith..., then come and take refuge; but if not, let fire...").

These conditional clauses set out two possible situations. The first condition is positive in its surface form ("if you have..."); the second condition poses an alternative possibility ("if you have not..."). The first clause is marked in Hebrew by a participle suggesting imminent action; it carries the sense, "if you are about to anoint me..." The clause-initial conditional marker, "if," is strengthened by the adverb "truly." Apart from the verb "anoint," the phrase "be king over you" provides a further link with the previous situation in which Abimelech is made king (9.1-6).

The first condition put by the bramble is that the trees' offer of royal status was a serious or genuine one. Thus: "If in good faith you are anointing me king..." If that condition were met, says the bramble, then its own offer is to provide shade for the trees of the forest. Although technically, "if" represents a positive value or a real possibility, the implication in the present setting is that this condition was not met, and so it takes on a negative sense.[1] This is further supported by the ironic tone of the response.

The second conditional element, "but if (you have) not (acted in good faith...)," is formally a negative one, but it represents a real situation, namely a people's failure to honor Jerubbaal's memory by making Abimelech their king.

As for the conditional clauses themselves, the first is merely a foil and ironic note to the primary conditional, the second of the pair. The focus of the bramble's address is that second conditional clause, not the first. Justification of this conclusion will be given below when the application of the fable is examined more closely.

Apart from the structural components of the bramble's response in v 15, note the mention of "fire." If the trees are not acting in good faith, as is implied, then "fire" will come out from the bramble and devour the trees. Although the "trees" are not identified, the fuller context would suggest that they are the "cedars of Lebanon." "Fire" then represents the destruction which the bramble causes. In the application to follow, the keyword "fire" will re-appear significantly in vv 49 and 52 as the means of destroying Shechem and the Tower of Thebez.

The fable and its application in verses 16-20

It has been demonstrated above that v 15 provides the structural elements for vv 16-20. The outworking of that application follows.

1 Lindars (356) notes the discussion about the interpretation of this first conditional clause. He believes that the first conditional must be viewed as a positive one, that the condition would be the curse contained in the second conditional. Another view is that the initial conditional is used ironically and thus negatively, because a bramble could in no way provide shade for the trees of the forest. Our preference for the negative view and for the ironic interpretation is based on the story as a whole and on the application of the fable which follows. Here the phrase "acting in good faith" means honoring the memory of Jerubbaal/Gideon and his family, of which Abimelech was a member. Clearly this basic condition was not met.

The application of the fable begins in v 16 with a double protasis of the first condition ("If you acted...and if you have dealt..."). It then breaks off. Vv 17-18 represent something of an aside, a comment on Jerubbaal's contribution to the people's security and on their subsequent betrayal of his achievements when they made Abimelech king. Though it is an aside, it is a highly significant comment relating directly to the first conditional clause and its question about the honor Jerubbaal deserved. It repeats the accusation that Abimelech was guilty of murder, a charge made in v 5. The temporary break in the flow of the narrative, which vv 17-18 represent, means that when the narrative resumes in v 19 the initial statement of v 16 regarding the dishonor shown to Jerubbaal's family, needed to be repeated. Reiteration is a typical feature of storytelling style, especially when the flow of the story has been interrupted. In our present case, the story then resumes with the apodosis of the first conditional clause: "then rejoice in Abimelech..." It is followed in v 20 by the second conditional ("But if not...") with its double apodosis, "then let fire come out...and devour..." (repeated).

The pattern in these verses is as follows:

v 16 Now, therefore, IF you acted in good faith and honour...
and IF you have dealt well... (compare v 15a)
[vv 17-18 Aside]
v 19 IF you have acted in good faith and honor
(repeats v 16)
THEN rejoice in Abimelech
and let him rejoice in you
v 20 But IF NOT, (then) let fire come out from Abimelech and
devour Shechem (compare v 15b)
...and let fire come out from ...Shechem and
devour Abimelech...

The introductory "now" is the rhetorical turning-point or discourse marker for the application of the fable. The three-fold repetition of the conditional particle "if" forming a tri-partite protasis may suggest that Jotham is affirming the appropriateness of the men of Shechem's action in making Abimelech king. However, it is immediately apparent from the aside in vv 17-18 that Jotham's meaning is laden with heavy sarcasm and is actually a condemnation of their actions.

When Jotham resumes his application in v 19, he combines the initial conditional phrases found in v 16. His intention is now obviously to condemn. To this summary the storyteller then skillfully adds the apodosis. That apodosis takes a double form with the parties being urged to "rejoice in" each other. Whereas the bramble in v 15 had offered protection and comfort to the trees if they were acting in good faith, now Jotham scornfully calls on both Abimelech and the men of Shechem to "rejoice in" each other.

Advancing to v 20, to the condition which is the climactic one, note that it also follows the pattern of mutual action. In this case the assumption is that the condition of good faith is not met, so Jotham calls down mutual destruction on the leaders of Shechem and Abimelech under the image of a "devouring fire." "Fire" is the keyword for destruction in v 15.

It was suggested above that the two conditions set out in v 15 are not real conditions, but that the first is a foil to the second, the climactic focus. Justification

of that view is required. It is evident in the application of the fable; the first condition given in v 16 and the reminder in vv 17-18 that the Shechemites dishonored Jerubbaal, combine to demonstrate how lacking in good faith the parties were. There can be no question that in the present context the first condition set out (v 15) has an ironic and condemnatory purpose; it is a condition which was not and could not be fulfilled. The introduction to the story in vv 1-6 has made that clear. Only the second condition is actual, despite its negative form. The Shechemites, in league with Abimelech, showed utter contempt for Jerubbaal and his memory by supporting the murder of Abimelech's seventy brothers. Thus the first conditional clause, despite its "positive" form, is actually a null condition. It is the second conditional clause which indicates the point Jotham wishes to make, namely that they acted in bad faith by making Abimelech their king.

There is, however, a rather significant change in moving from the fable to its application. Whereas the fable spoke primarily of the bramble's actions, in Jotham's use of the fable the action becomes a mutual one, in the sense that both parties act upon one another. The men of Shechem and Abimelech are to "rejoice in" one another, meaning they each will destroy the other. This ironic use of the verb "rejoice" cannot be overlooked if one is to understand the manner in which Jotham applies the fable. The change to mutual action in the application then marks the theme of the succeeding narrative, vv 26-55.

The mutual destruction of Abimelech and the people of Shechem is the "curse" (v 57) which Jotham calls down. Vv 26-55 demonstrate the curse's outworking.

Jotham's fable and Abimelech's fate

This section examines how the storyteller weaves the theme of mutual destruction into the incidents which follow, leading to the conclusion (vv 56-57) in which divine justice is pronounced.

The final part of the chapter can be divided into five scenes as follows:

vv 22-25 trouble between the men of Shechem and Abimelech
vv 26-41 the Gaal episode
vv 42-45 the destruction of Shechem
vv 46-49 the destruction of the Tower of Shechem
vv 50-55 the destruction of Thebez and Abimelech's death
vv 56-57 conclusion

i) vv 22-25 After Abimelech's brief three-year "rule" God intervened to sow the seeds of conflict between the Shechemites and Abimelech. The purpose of that intervention was to bring both Abimelech and the people of Shechem to justice for their roles in the murder of Jerubbaal's sons. In v 25 that conflict expresses itself in the plot of the Shechemites who put men in the mountains to ambush Abimelech. Many of the details of this incident or plot are obviously omitted in the story as it now stands. It is now nothing more than a terse summary, but it does introduce two Hebrew keywords—*ro'sh*, ("head," "mountain," "company") and *'rb*, ("ambush"). It also introduces a key phrase, "it was told Abimelech." a phrase which seems to have some rhetorical function as it leads into the Gaal account as well as into the incidents recorded in vv 42-45 and 46-49.

In view of the theme of judgment against Abimelech announced in both the application of the fable in v 20 and in vv 23-24, the hearer/reader will be expecting

to hear how God actually brought Abimelech to justice. As the narrative moves along there is a deliberate heightening of tension as first one then another possible trap fails to snare Abimelech and he seems increasingly invincible. The storyteller quite deliberately delays the climax to the entire episode, leaving the audience wondering if and when divine justice will fall on Abimelech.

ii) vv 26-41 Suddenly Gaal is introduced. No information is given about this person who with his men appears in Shechem and within a very short time wins the people's support. On the occasion of a festival, Gaal questions the right of Abimelech to rule. The irony of this situation would not be lost on the audience who recall that this is the same kind of approach Abimelech used in vv 1-3 to win the Shechemites' support in the first instance. However, in the present context, this functions as another in the moves which God has taken to create discord between Abimelech and the people of Shechem.

Thus Gaal proposes himself as a better candidate for leadership of Shechem than Abimelech. The Shechemites concur in Gaal's reasoning that Abimelech has no right to claim authority over them. However, Abimelech still has an ally in one of the leaders of the town, and this Zebul sends a message to him encouraging him to attack Shechem and Gaal.

Abimelech lies in wait outside the town. Gaal notices what he believes to be people coming down from the top of the surrounding mountains. This feature of the narrative is rather peculiar if it is true that Abimelech and his men are lying in wait outside the town walls; they were no longer in the mountains. Despite this slight difficulty, Zebul plays his role as supporter of Abimelech and encourages Gaal to go out and attack Abimelech. Gaal is defeated.

Although God has been sowing the seeds of discord to bring about Abimelech's downfall, at the first threat to his position and even his life, Abimelech is the victor. So clearly this is not the occasion upon which divine justice is to be at work. Rather, Abimelech once again uses treachery to defeat an enemy. Thus the storyteller, by showing Abimelech frustrating God's plans heightens the reader's interest in the unfolding drama.

iii) vv 42-45 This episode in the narrative has been suggested as the logical continuation of v 29 rather than of v 41[1]. In other words, on this theory, the Gaal episode is an independent item inserted into the older narrative. However, as Boling points out,[2] the use of the Hebrew term *'am* to identify the ordinary citizens of Shechem as opposed to Gaal and his men, makes it clear that this episode follows logically from the previous one. These ordinary citizens (*'am*) move out to their fields the day following the defeat of Gaal in the hope that the crisis will have passed.

Again "Abimelech was told..." of the citizens' actions and so once again he lies in wait for them. This rhetorically significant phrase seems to suggest a counter-theme, namely that there is someone, presumably Zebul or one of his supporters, who is inside Shechem and as it were acting against the divine plan to bring Abimelech to justice. Because of this kind of assistance, Abimelech's second siege of the town is successful. Having captured the town, Abimelech razes it to the ground and as a final insult "sows it with salt."

1 G.F. Moore, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Judges*. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark 1958, 262-263.

2 R.G. Boling, *Judges*, Anchor Bible 6A. New York: Doubleday and Co. Inc. 1975, 179-280.

Although the word "fire" does not appear in this narrative as the means of destruction, it is nonetheless clear that the reader/hearer is expected to view it as at least a partial fulfillment of one aspect of Jotham's curse in v 20, namely Abimelech's devouring of Shechem.

iv) vv 46-49 Residents of the Tower of Shechem flee to the stronghold of the El-Berith Temple. The key phrase—"it was told Abimelech"—marks this as another incident in the post-curse narrative. It also marks the sub-plot in which God's judgment of Abimelech seems to be frustrated again.

On this occasion the keyword "fire" is used, Abimelech setting fire to the stronghold (v 49) and burning alive all who have sought refuge in it. This completes the destruction of Shechem and fulfills one element of the curse. Meanwhile, Abimelech continues on his apparently invincible way with the help of the "insider" Zebul. The reader/hearer continues to await the outworking of divine justice on him.

v) vv 50-55 Employing tactics similar to those used in the last attack, Abimelech attempts to repeat his success. He plans to "fire" the Tower of Thebez. However, a certain woman despatches him with a well-aimed mill-stone dropped from atop the tower. Here the keyword "one" (or "certain"), one of the two numerals which bind this story together, appears again. Abimelech lies mortally wounded in the head (*ro'sh*). This incident also draws upon another of the themes of recent chapters of Judges, namely the role of women in bringing divine justice or assistance to Israel (compare Deborah and Jael in chapters 4-5).

vi) vv 56-57 The storyteller now adds a theological conclusion, explaining how Abimelech's death avenges the murder of his "seventy" brothers. The second key numeral appears in inclusio fashion here. In an apparent play on words the author also explains how these events display divine justice "falling on the heads" of the Shechemites, just as the mill-stone fell on the head of Abimelech.

Thus the "curse" which Jotham uttered against both parties is fulfilled. Abimelech's rebellion against his paternal family, the dishonor he brought upon his father, and the Shechemites' guilty association with him, have all resulted in their mutual destruction. The divine hand in these latter events was announced in vv 23-24, then illustrated in the narratives following, climaxing in the theological conclusion in vv 56-57. In this way the theme of mutual destruction set by the fable and Jotham's adaptation of it in v 20, is realized.

Conclusion

Jotham's fable serves a pivotal role in Judges 9. Regardless of whatever pre-history the fable may have had or what its form may have been, in its present setting it provides the point of departure for Jotham's pronouncement that Abimelech and his co-conspirators will destroy one another. This article has argued that the second of the conditional clauses in v 15 which are now the climax to the fable carries the structural elements which are the foundation for the application to follow. However, throughout the course of Jotham's application of the fable, yet another element was introduced, namely that of mutual conflict and destruction. That variation expanded the earlier form of the fable, suggesting that the fable was almost certainly borrowed and adapted by Jotham.

The over-riding purpose of the chapter is to show how justice was done to one who out of a lust for power dishonored his father.