

Shoftim 9 in the Context of its Author's View on Monarchy

The Ascension of Avimelech

It is difficult to understand the story and meaning of Shoftim 9 without acknowledging its context within the book of Shoftim. The story of Avimelech, son of Gideon, immediately follows the story of Gideon and is an extension of the commentary offered by the story of Gideon. The author of the book of Shoftim, Shmuel, certainly had several objectives in how the text was structured in addition to offering explicit and implicit criticism of the characters during that time frame. We will discuss in depth the objectives in the Avimelech (and by extension Gideon) narrative and how those objectives are achieved throughout the text. Specifically, I will focus on Shmuel's views and messages relating to monarchy.

A central criticism Shmuel levels against the Jews during the Shoftim period is the lack of a monarch with central authority. In doing so, Shmuel seeks to attribute the failings of the Jewish people during that period to the lack of central authority. There are two central places where this criticism can be found most: first, in the Gideon narrative, and second in the narrative of the Pilegish B'Givaah. At the outset of the narrative of the Pilgish B'Givaah, Shmuel writes **"In those days, when there was no king in Israel**, a certain Levite residing at the other end of the hill country of Ephraim took to himself a concubine from Bethlehem in Judah."¹ The detail of

¹ Shoftim 19:1

there being no king is not central to the narrative unless Shmuel was trying to lay the blame for the horrific events to follow at the feet of a nation that did not appoint a monarch.

Perhaps less explicitly, we see Shmuel offer the same criticism of Gideon in Shoftim 8. After leading the nation of Israel successfully in battle, Gideon is offered the monarchy by the people: “Then those [who fought] on Israel’s side said to Gideon, “Rule over us—you, your son, and your grandson as well; for you have saved us from the Midianites.” However, we see that Gideon does not want the monarchy instead responding: “But Gideon replied, ‘I will not rule over you myself, nor shall my son rule over you; GOD alone shall rule over you.’”² On its face, this is an act of humility by Gideon. Without delving into the narrative of Gideon too deeply, it shows significant growth in Gideon’s character that he recognizes that he is merely a pawn of God and that he is not to be commended for the military victory. Shmuel seemingly does not see it this way. Shmuel uses the rest of Shoftim 8 to describe how Gideon’s good intentions backfire and ultimately lead the nation astray into idolatry. Shmuel may have structured the narrative in this way to suggest that the downfall of the Jews was the direct consequence of Gideon’s refusal to become king.

It is with that criticism in mind that we are meant to interpret the events of Shoftim 9. Shoftim begins with Avimelech posing the following question: “Put this question to all the citizens of Shechem: Which is better for you—to be ruled by all seventy sons of Jerubbaal, or to be ruled by one? And remember, I am your own flesh and blood.”³ It is no coincidence that we see the question of central authority, and monarchy specifically, being posed immediately within Shoftim 9. However, the latter half of the *pasuk* foreshadows another objective held by Shmuel.

² Shoftim 8:22-24

³ Shoftim 9:2

As we will explore, the story of Avimelech is not one of successful monarchy. The initial theory I proposed is that Shmuel criticizes the nation of Israel when they do not appoint a monarch. If so, this message would seem to undercut that criticism by showing the failings of a monarch. However, I contend that the story of Avimelech only furthers Shmuel's more nuanced message. As I will show, Shmuel's message is not simply that there needs to be a monarch for the nation of Israel to enjoy success, maintain unity, and be God-fearing. Shmuel has a very specific image of the monarchy and its role and he uses the story of Avimelech to bring that image into the world.

To understand the objectives achieved by the Avimelech narrative, I believe we should attempt to describe Shmuel's ideal monarch. When attempting to contrast Avimelech with Shmuel's ideal monarch, I will mostly refer to King David and occasionally Shaul. Although David was not necessarily perfect, some scholars have suggested that much of the book of Shoftim is criticism by Shmuel of the dynasty of Shaul as a means of reinforcing the legitimacy of the Davidic dynasty.⁴ Further, it has been suggested that Shoftim is a criticism of the northern tribes when compared to Judah.⁵ In this sense, the Avimelech narrative serves as a prime example of the failings of the North. We see earlier in Shoftim 8 that Gideon was located in Ofrah, "Gideon made an ephod of this gold and set it up in his own town of Ofrah."⁶ (Ofrah is located within the portion of the tribe of Menashe)

⁴ Brettler, Marc. "The Book of Judges: Literature as Politics." *Journal of Biblical Literature*, vol. 108, no. 3, 1989, pp. 395–418. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3267111>. Brettler suggests that Shoftim 19-21 is a polemic against Shaul and his descendants

⁵ See also Brettler pp. 21. He suggests that Judges 17-18 is a polemic against the religio-political institutions of the North

⁶ Shoftim 8:27

With the framing that Avimelech is to serve as the example of the failings of the North, we can begin to understand the rest of Shoftim 9. For one, there are the details of how Avimelech rose to power. Shoftim 9:4-5 describe the events.

“They [Shechem] gave him seventy shekels from the temple of Baal-berith; and with this Abimelech hired some worthless and reckless men, and they followed him. Then he went to his father’s house in Ophrah and killed his brothers, the sons of Jerubbaal, seventy in succession on one stone. Only Jotham, the youngest son of Jerubbaal, survived, because he went into hiding. All the citizens of Shechem and all Beth-millo convened, and they proclaimed Abimelech king at the terebinth of the pillar at Shechem.”

Using David as our example of a proper king, there are two main contrasts I feel necessary to draw between David’s rise to power and Avimelech. First, there is no mention of divine approval in the context of Avimelech. Instead, we find that he seizes power by eliminating all competition for the throne. Further, we find that Avimelech is not proclaimed king by the people of Israel, but rather by the citizens of Shechem and Beth-millo. This is in stark contrast to the appointments of Shaul and David.

In Shmuel I, we find that Shaul is divinely appointed - “Samuel took a flask of oil and poured some on Saul’s head and kissed him, and said, “The LORD herewith anoints you ruler over His own people.”⁷ Further, we find that the people of Israel accept Shaul in: “And Samuel said to the people, “Do you see the one whom the LORD has chosen? There is none like him among all the people.” And all the people acclaimed him, shouting, ‘Long live the king!’”⁸ Thus,

⁷ Shmuel I 10:1

⁸ Shmuel I 10:24

unlike Avimelech, Shaul didn't seize power so much as it was bestowed upon him by God and the people of Israel.

Similarly, we find divine approval given to David. In *Shmuel II* 2, we find that David gets divine approval before going to be anointed as king over the Kingdom of Judah. "Sometime afterward, David inquired of the LORD, "Shall I go up to one of the towns of Judah?" The LORD answered, "Yes." David further asked, "Which one shall I go up to?" And the LORD replied, "To Hebron."⁹ We see this most definitively in *Shmuel II* 7, where God instructs Nathan the Prophet to tell David that "Your house and your kingship shall ever be secure before you; your throne shall be established forever."¹⁰

A second stark contrast between the ascension of Avimelech and the other kings of Israel is the military strength needed to ascend to the throne. We will see later that Avimelech is to be portrayed as a coward and unworthy leader as he is led to his death by a woman. However, I believe that even his rise to power is meant to call into question his bravery and leadership. He ascends by attacking his defenseless and unsuspecting brothers. To further amplify that the defeat was nothing impressive, *Shmuel* characterizes Avimelech's fighters not as warriors but as "some worthless and reckless men."¹¹ *Shmuel* conveys that Avimelech's ascension was not that of a king taking control of his dominion but an unworthy usurper who did not earn his way to the throne.

Avimelech's ascension stands in extremely stark contrast to that of David. David famously had several opportunities to kill a defenseless Shaul but chose not to as "The LORD forbid that I should do such a thing to my lord—the LORD's anointed—that I should raise my

⁹ *Shmuel II* 2:1

¹⁰ *Shmuel II* 7:16

¹¹ *Shoftim* 9:4

hand against him; for he is the LORD's anointed."¹² Additionally, it would have been a sign of cowardice on the part of David to eliminate his enemy while defenseless. Further, while consolidating his rule over Israel and Judah, David must contend with Shaul's son, Ish-bosheth, who had been appointed King over the Northern tribes of Israel. Here we find that "David's soldiers... defeated the Benjaminites and the men under Abner and killed three hundred and sixty men."¹³ The rise of David is further played up by highlighting the difficulty of dispatching the enemy he faced "The war between the House of Saul and the House of David was long-drawn-out; but David kept growing stronger, while the House of Shaul grew weaker."¹⁴ The attitude the reader is left with is that David has *earned* the right to be the king over Israel after dispatching a worthy but weaker enemy in battle. The description of Avimelech's ascension could not contrast more sharply.

Jotham's Fable

Perhaps the most written-about section of Shoftim 9 is Jotham's fable and his application of it to the story of Avimelech. As many scholars have pointed out, there seems to be a great difference between the fable and the curse that follows. The most obvious difference between the fable and the moral that Jotham applies to it is that, whereas the thornbush warns the trees that they will be destroyed if they are not approaching him in sincerity, the moral deals with Shechem's sincerity in its dealings with Gideon/Jerubbaal and his house, not with Shechem's sincerity in its dealings with Avimelech.¹⁵ Some scholars have even suggested that the fable is so

¹² Shmuel I 24:7

¹³ Shmuel II 2:31

¹⁴ Shmuel II 3:1

¹⁵ Janzen, D. (2012). Gideon's house as the 'āṭād: A Proposal for Reading Jotham's Fable. *The Catholic Biblical quarterly*, 74(3), 465-475

misplaced it must have been lifted from another source entirely.¹⁶ David Janzen proposes a unique reading of the fable that instead understands the thornbush to be referring to Gideon and not Abimelech in order to resolve the issues encountered by the classical reading. Either way, we still must understand why Shmuel chose to recount this fable.

Rashi takes a unique approach to Jotham's fable understanding it as a parable referring to the Jewish people directly. He understands the trees offer of Kingship to the various trees to refer to previous leaders of the Jewish people. First, regarding the olive tree, Rashi writes "Osniel ben Kenaz, a tribesman of Judah, who are entitled 'olive'..."¹⁷ Next, regarding the fig tree, Rashi writes "This refers to Devorah."¹⁸ Lastly, Rashi explains the offer to the vine - "This refers to Gidon, a descendant of Yoseif, of whom it is said, 'A flourishing son'—'like a grapevine positioned'..."¹⁹ As Abarbanel comments, this understanding is difficult to reconcile with the text of previous chapters of Shoftim which only record an offer of kingship to Gideon but not to Osniel or Devorah. Abarbanel instead suggests that the olive, fig and vine refer to the other sons of Gideon who were more fit for the kingship.²⁰ In either case, the parable is meant to refer to those more worthy of being a king. Thus, perhaps Shmuel includes this narrative to reinforce his notion of a worthy leader. Thus we can look to each group suggested and attempt to interpret what Shmuel might have wanted them to represent.

In the case of Rashi, the group of worthy leaders represents previous righteous leaders of the Jewish people who brought temporary repentance from sin during their lifetimes.

Interestingly, Devorah is included in this group and we can therefore deduce that, according to Rashi's view, a worthy leader in Shmuel's eyes does not necessarily need to have achieved

¹⁶ Janzen quoting Barnabas Lindars, "Jotham's Fable— A New Form-Critical Analysis," JTS 24 (1973) 355-66, esp. 355-60 among others

¹⁷ Rashi on Shoftim 9:8

¹⁸ Rashi on Shoftim 9:11

¹⁹ Rashi on Shoftim 9:13

²⁰ Abarbanel on Shoftim 9:8, Shoftim 9:14

military prominence nor even be male.²¹ Thus, it would seem that the ideal leaders in Shmuel's eyes are those who successfully influence the Jewish people to improve religiously and that the other attributes are secondary.

In the case of Abarbanel, it is questionable that Shmuel would believe the other sons of Gideon to be more appropriate rulers. As I have previously shown, one of Shmuel's central criticisms of the people of Israel during the Shoftim period was an inability/unwillingness to establish a central monarchical authority. Thus it would be strange for Shmuel to prefer the tumultuous rule certain to ensue with no clear successor to Gideon. Perhaps this was meant as another criticism of Gideon for refusing the kingship on behalf of himself and his family.²² However, that too seems unlikely as the speaker is Jotham, an unfit vehicle for criticism of his father Gideon.

The most likely interpretation can be found in the writing of the Abarbanel. He writes "The essence of the parable is to tell us ... that in truth, it is not befitting a king to beseech the people to appoint him ruler, rather the people should request his kingship and he should choose them... like the saying goes "those who honor, honor runs from them"..."²³ Thus, Shmuel would be informing the reader of a core principle of the essence of a worthy leader: someone chosen by the people, and one who accepts the kingship not out of honor but out of duty. We see that humility in Shaul and David. After David is told of the promises God makes to bestow the kingship upon him and his descendants, he responds "What am I, O Lord GOD, and what is my family, that You have brought me thus far?"²⁴ Additionally, according to the Abarbanel, the people should "choose the most fit and honorable" to be their leader. We find by Shaul and

²¹ It is also worth noting that Rashi leaves Barak off the list entirely despite their being ambiguity amongst commentators about whether Barak or Deborah was the true *Shofet*.

²² In their offer of kingship to Gideon, they offer it to "your son, and your grandson as well" (Shoftim 8:22)

²³ Abarbanel on Shoftim 9:14

²⁴ Shmuel II 7:18

David that they are described favorably as having been distinguished before they were approached to be king. The first description of Shaul is “an excellent young man; no one among the Israelites was handsomer than he; he was a head taller than any of the people.”²⁵ Thus, the parable is meant to represent locally what Avimelech lacks and globally the description of an ideal leader for the People of Israel.

Avimelech’s Rule and Downfall

Following Jotham’s warning to the people of Shechem, we are told “*Vayisar* Avimelech.”²⁶ The choice of language is interesting - *Vayisar* (to hold sway/rule) as opposed to *Vayimloch* (which implies kingship). Rashi seemingly explains this word choice as indicating that “he [Avimelech] wielded his authority through repression, and conducted himself arrogantly.”²⁷ In this sense, Shmuel is indicating to us that Avimelech is not a king; rather, as some scholars have suggested, Avimelech is a paradigmatic anti-monarch.²⁸ Indeed, perhaps it was Shmuel’s intent to use Avimelech as a way of defining the incorrect approach to monarchy. Additionally, by highlighting certain failures of Avimelech, Shmuel is able to criticize his contemporaries who have failed in similar fashion.

During the period of discord, we find that Avimelech’s subjects abandon him and disdain him for the murders of his brothers. Additionally, we find that the people of Shechem were not following his laws and brazenly stealing.²⁹ This would all culminate in their loyalty switching from Avimelech to Gaal son of Ebed. This description is meant to reinforce the idea that a

²⁵ Shmuel I 9:2

²⁶ Shoftim 9:22

²⁷ Rashi on Shoftim 9:22

²⁸ See Oest, Gordon K. Legitimacy, Illegitimacy, and the Right to Rule: Windows on Abimelech’s Rise and Demise in Judges 9. New York: T & T Clark International, 2011 who quotes Martin Buber, The Kingship of God (3d ed.; trans. R. Scheimann; London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1967), 75 among others

²⁹ Shoftim 9:26

worthy king is popular amongst his people, who fear him. The parallels between this narrative and the narrative of Shaul and David are unignorable.

Much like Gaal son of Ebed, David gained the heart of the nation. After his triumph over Goliath and further military victories, we are told that “When the [troops] came home... the women of all the towns of Israel came out singing... The women sang as they danced, and they chanted: Saul has slain his thousands; David, his tens of thousands!”³⁰ This causes Shaul to be jealous which only drives David into more successful positions culminating with the following: “All Israel and Judah loved David, for he marched at their head.”³¹ Perhaps the Gaal narrative is meant to criticize Shaul - for a worthy king would never be so outshined by his subject as happened to Avimelech.

The parallels between David and Gaal end there. Whereas David was humble and refused to bring about the death of Shaul directly, Gaal attempts to overthrow Avimelech. This sets the scene for the ultimate portrayal of Avimelech as anti-monarch: going to war with his own people. Avimelech was not attempting to regain control rather he was attempting to destroy. “Avimelech fought against the city all that day. He captured the city and massacred the people in it; he razed the town and sowed it with salt.”³² The act of razing the town and sowing it with salt were to ensure that the city could not prosper for a generation. This is the ultimate betrayal: if the duty of a worthy king is to protect his people, Avimelech’s actions perfectly show why he is the anti-king.

Not content with destroying the men, Avimelech seeks total destruction and attempts to kill the women and children too. Here, Avimelech meets his downfall as “a woman dropped an

³⁰ Shmuel I 18:6-7

³¹ Shmuel I 18:16

³² Shoftim 9:45

upper millstone on Abimelech's head and cracked his skull."³³ Rather than be killed by a woman, "He immediately cried out to his attendant, his arms-bearer, "Draw your dagger and finish me off, that they may not say of me, 'A woman killed him!'" So his attendant stabbed him, and he died."³⁴ As seen in the story of Sisra in Shoftim 4, it is dishonorable to have been killed by a woman. This too is highlighted to show that Avimelech is the anti-monarch: if a worthy monarch is honorable and masculine, the anti-monarch who was never worthy should die an unworthy death. (While Shmuel died before Shaul, and therefore could not have intended to link Shaul's suicide³⁵ to Avimelech's, it is nonetheless noteworthy that both men died by suicide.)

³³ Shoftim 9:53

³⁴ Shoftim 9:54

³⁵ Shmuel I 31:4