

14.11 Sixth Judge, Abimelech (Judges 8:30–35; 9:1–57)

✓ “Check” it out; opinion, inference, supposed conversation, or fact one can verify follows

[. . .] indicates a remark to the teacher that usually should not be read. It also indicates answers to questions.

Visuals and Tools:

- Pictures and other visuals found at the end of this lesson. Please give credit to the sources of pictures.
- Check “Activities” and “Handwork” found below for additional materials.
- A millstone or grindstone if you can find one

Bible Time Tips and Terms to Teach: Vocabulary words are enlarged for flashcards at the end of this lesson. Print, cut out, and glue to card stock, or just print on colorful cardstock.

- *Shechem*: the town at the base of Mount Gerizim (blessing) and Mount Ebal (cursing)
- *concubine*: a servant wife
- *cedars of Lebanon* [locate]: strong, tall evergreen trees in the country of Lebanon
- *ambush*: a surprise attack by people lying in wait in a concealed position
- *millstone*: heavy round stone used to grind grain
- *armor bearer*: someone who helps a warrior by carrying his weapons

Scripture: (ESV)

Judges 8:30 Now Gideon had seventy sons, his own offspring, for he had many wives. 31 And his concubine who was in Shechem also bore him a son, and he called his name Abimelech. . . .

33 As soon as Gideon died, the people of Israel turned again and whored after the Baals and made Baal-berith their god. 34 And the people of Israel did not remember the Lord their God, who had delivered them from the hand of all their enemies on every side, 35 and they did not show steadfast love to the family of Jerubbaal (that is, Gideon) in return for all the good that he had done to Israel.

9:1 Now Abimelech the son of Jerubbaal went to Shechem to his mother’s relatives and said to them and to the whole clan of his mother’s family, 2 “Say in the ears of all the leaders of Shechem, ‘Which is better for you, that all seventy of the sons of Jerubbaal rule over you, or that one rule over you?’ Remember also that I am your bone and your flesh.”

3 And his mother’s relatives spoke all these words on his behalf in the ears of all the leaders of Shechem, and their hearts inclined to follow Abimelech, for they said, “He is our brother.” 4 And they gave him seventy pieces of silver out of the house of Baal-berith with which Abimelech hired worthless and reckless fellows, who followed him. 5 And he went to his father’s house at Ophrah and killed his brothers the sons of Jerubbaal, seventy men, on one stone. But Jotham the youngest son of Jerubbaal was left, for he hid himself. 6 And all the leaders of Shechem came together, and all Beth-millo, and they went and made Abimelech king, by the oak of the pillar at Shechem.

7 When it was told to Jotham, he went and stood on top of Mount Gerizim and cried aloud and said to them, “Listen to me, you leaders of Shechem, that God may listen to you. 8 The trees once went out to anoint a king over them, and they said to the olive tree, ‘Reign over us.’ 9 But the olive tree said to them, ‘Shall I leave my abundance, by which gods and men are honored, and go hold sway over the trees?’ 10 And the trees said to the fig tree, ‘You come and reign over us.’ 11 But the fig tree said to them, ‘Shall I leave my sweetness and my good fruit and go hold sway over the trees?’ 12 And the trees said to the vine, ‘You come and reign over us.’ 13 But the vine said to them, ‘Shall I leave my wine that cheers God and men and go hold sway over the trees?’ 14 Then all the trees said to the bramble, ‘You come and reign over us.’ 15 And the bramble said to the trees, ‘If in good faith you are anointing me king over you, then come and take refuge in my shade, but if not, let fire come

out of the bramble and devour the cedars of Lebanon.’

16 “Now therefore, if you acted in good faith and integrity when you made Abimelech king, and if you have dealt well with Jerubbaal and his house and have done to him as his deeds deserved— 17 for my father fought for you and risked his life and delivered you from the hand of Midian, 18 and you have risen up against my father’s house this day and have killed his sons, seventy men on one stone, and have made Abimelech, the son of his female servant, king over the leaders of Shechem, because he is your relative— 19 if you then have acted in good faith and integrity with Jerubbaal and with his house this day, then rejoice in Abimelech, and let him also rejoice in you. 20 But if not, let fire come out from Abimelech and devour the leaders of Shechem and Beth-millo; and let fire come out from the leaders of Shechem and from Beth-millo and devour Abimelech.” 21 And Jotham ran away and fled and went to Beer and lived there, because of Abimelech his brother.

22 Abimelech ruled over Israel three years. 23 And God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the leaders of Shechem, and the leaders of Shechem dealt treacherously with Abimelech, 24 that the violence done to the seventy sons of Jerubbaal might come, and their blood be laid on Abimelech their brother, who killed them, and on the men of Shechem, who strengthened his hands to kill his brothers. 25 And the leaders of Shechem put men in ambush against him on the mountaintops, and they robbed all who passed by them along that way. And it was told to Abimelech.

26 And Gaal the son of Ebed moved into Shechem with his relatives, and the leaders of Shechem put confidence in him. 27 And they went out into the field and gathered the grapes from their vineyards and trod them and held a festival; and they went into the house of their god and ate and drank and reviled Abimelech. 28 And Gaal the son of Ebed said, “Who is Abimelech, and who are we of Shechem, that we should serve him? Is he not the son of Jerubbaal, and is not Zebul his officer? Serve the men of Hamor the father of Shechem; but why should we serve him? 29 Would that this people were under my hand! Then I would remove Abimelech. I would say to Abimelech, ‘Increase your army, and come out.’”

30 When Zebul the ruler of the city heard the words of Gaal the son of Ebed, his anger was kindled. 31 And he sent messengers to Abimelech secretly, saying, “Behold, Gaal the son of Ebed and his relatives have come to Shechem, and they are stirring up the city against you. 32 Now therefore, go by night, you and the people who are with you, and set an ambush in the field. 33 Then in the morning, as soon as the sun is up, rise early and rush upon the city. And when he and the people who are with him come out against you, you may do to them as your hand finds to do.”

34 So Abimelech and all the men who were with him rose up by night and set an ambush against Shechem in four companies. 35 And Gaal the son of Ebed went out and stood in the entrance of the gate of the city, and Abimelech and the people who were with him rose from the ambush. 36 And when Gaal saw the people, he said to Zebul, “Look, people are coming down from the mountaintops!” And Zebul said to him, “You mistake the shadow of the mountains for men.” 37 Gaal spoke again and said, “Look, people are coming down from the center of the land, and one company is coming from the direction of the Diviners’ Oak.” 38 Then Zebul said to him, “Where is your mouth now, you who said, ‘Who is Abimelech, that we should serve him?’ Are not these the people whom you despised? Go out now and fight with them.” 39 And Gaal went out at the head of the leaders of Shechem and fought with Abimelech. 40 And Abimelech chased him, and he fled before him. And many fell wounded, up to the entrance of the gate. 41 And Abimelech lived at Arumah, and Zebul drove out Gaal and his relatives, so that they could not dwell at Shechem.

42 On the following day, the people went out into the field, and Abimelech was told. 43 He took his people and divided them into three companies and set an ambush in the fields. And he looked and saw the people coming out of the city. So he rose against them and killed them. 44 Abimelech and the company that was with him rushed forward and stood at the entrance of the gate of the city, while the two companies rushed upon all who were in the field and killed them. 45 And Abimelech fought against the city all that day. He captured the city and killed the people who were in it, and he razed the city and sowed it with salt.

46 When all the leaders of the Tower of Shechem heard of it, they entered the stronghold of the house of El-berith. 47 Abimelech was told that all the leaders of the Tower of Shechem were gathered together. 48 And

Abimelech went up to Mount Zalmon, he and all the people who were with him. And Abimelech took an axe in his hand and cut down a bundle of brushwood and took it up and laid it on his shoulder. And he said to the men who were with him, “What you have seen me do, hurry and do as I have done.” 49 So every one of the people cut down his bundle and following Abimelech put it against the stronghold, and they set the stronghold on fire over them, so that all the people of the Tower of Shechem also died, about 1,000 men and women.

50 Then Abimelech went to Thebez and encamped against Thebez and captured it. 51 But there was a strong tower within the city, and all the men and women and all the leaders of the city fled to it and shut themselves in, and they went up to the roof of the tower. 52 And Abimelech came to the tower and fought against it and drew near to the door of the tower to burn it with fire. 53 And a certain woman threw an upper millstone on Abimelech’s head and crushed his skull. 54 Then he called quickly to the young man his armor-bearer and said to him, “Draw your sword and kill me, lest they say of me, ‘A woman killed him.’” And his young man thrust him through, and he died. 55 And when the men of Israel saw that Abimelech was dead, everyone departed to his home. 56 Thus God returned the evil of Abimelech, which he committed against his father in killing his seventy brothers. 57 And God also made all the evil of the men of Shechem return on their heads, and upon them came the curse of Jotham the son of Jerubbaal.

Introduction/Review:

Judges is a depressing book because it shows the misery and trouble that comes when people forsake the living, true God. The Bible tells things as they are, even that Gideon did not follow God truly at the end of his valiant life.

Judges is also an encouraging book, showing God’s mercy to deliver us from sin.

After Gideon’s victory over the Midianites, Israel wanted to make Gideon king. How did Gideon respond to this request? [Neither he nor his sons would be king, but God would be king over them.]

What was the name Gideon’s father gave him after he broke down Baal’s altar? [Jerubbaal, “let Baal plead.”] This is the name for Gideon that we will use in this story, for it is the one Scripture uses for him in these chapters. When the people said the name *Jerubbaal*, ✓maybe they were mocking the false god Baal. Sadly, as soon as Gideon/Jerubbaal died at an old age, the people worshiped Baal-berith, a false god.

Story:

Now, Jerubbaal had seventy sons because he had many wives. (This high number of sons and wives was due to the bad practice of polygamy. The Bible does not comment here on this practice, but we know it’s not good.) One of Jerubbaal’s sons was named Abimelech, which means “my father is king.” A person might wonder why Jerubbaal gave his son this name. ✓Perhaps he actually did think of himself as a monarch despite his denial of the kingship.

Stirring up rebellion

Abimelech’s mother was a servant wife, a concubine, from the city of Shechem [locate]. Abimelech went to his mother’s city and stirred up rebellion by asking his mother’s brothers, “Should seventy sons of Jerubbaal reign over you, or should one rule over you? Remember, now, I’m like your brother since this is my mother’s home.”

The uncles went to ask the leaders of the city about the possibility of having Abimelech be their king, and they all agreed to do so, giving him seventy pieces of silver from the temple of their god. Taking this money, Abimelech hired foolish and reckless men, men who had no sense of responsibility, to do a terrible thing. Together they went to Ophrah [locate], Jerubbaal’s hometown, and slew, at one stone, the other sixty-eight sons of Gideon. I say *sixty-eight* because one other son besides Abimelech survived. The youngest son, Jotham, hid himself and escaped being slain.

Predicting ruin

When the Shechemites gathered to crown their new king, Jotham appeared at the top of Mount Gerizim and

shouted down to the people of Shechem, “Listen to me so that God may listen to you. Hear my story: The trees wanted a king. They went to the olive tree and asked it to be their king. The olive tree said, ‘Why should I leave my usefulness in bearing sweet fruit in order to rule over you? No, I will not be your king.’

“So the trees said to the fig tree, ‘You come and reign over us.’ But the fig tree said to them, ‘Shall I leave my sweetness and my good fruit and go hold sway over the trees?’

“The trees then said to the grape vine, ‘You come and reign over us.’ But the vine said to them, ‘Shall I leave my wine that cheers God and men and go hold sway over the trees?’

“Finally,” said Jotham, “the trees went to the useless, fruitless, harmful, scratching bramble bush and asked it to rule the trees. The bramble said, ‘Yes, I will rule over you. If you truly want to anoint me king over you, then come and take refuge in my shade.¹ But if not, let fire come out of the bramble and devour the cedars of Lebanon.’”

Whom do you think Jotham was saying was the bramble? It was Abimelech. If Abimelech had killed his brothers in order to rule, could he be trusted to be a good king? No. In fact, Jotham was stating in his story that if Abimelech’s subjects did not trust and serve Abimelech as he desired, he would devour those subjects,² whom Jotham compared to strong cedar trees in Lebanon.

Jotham’s story was finished but not his warning. He continued, “If you have done right to my father Jerubbaal’s family—remember how he fought for you and delivered you from Midian, but you have killed his sons and have made Abimelech king—if you have done right to Jerubbaal, then be happy together. But if not, then let fire come out from Abimelech and devour the leaders of Shechem, and let fire come out from the leaders of Shechem and devour Abimelech.” Oooo! These were serious warnings, even prophecies.

After Jotham delivered his message, he ran away for fear of Abimelech his brother.

Fulfilling part one

Time passed. With the passage of time, we sometimes forget about what God has told us through His messengers, but it inevitably comes to pass.

Abimelech had ruled three whole years when God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the men of Shechem. This means that they disliked each other—a lot. The Bible states this evil spirit between them all was so that Jotham’s prophecy would come true, and the city of Shechem would be punished for its part in murdering the sixty-eight sons of Jerubbaal. This contention was so severe that the men of Shechem dealt “treacherously” with Abimelech.

³First, they set up liars in wait in Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal who were ready to ambush Abimelech or those associated with him. In fact, they robbed people going to Shechem.

Second, after a harvest of grapes and a feast to worship their god, the people put confidence in a man, Gaal, who had moved to Shechem with his relatives. Gaal boasted, “Who is Abimelech, and who are we of Shechem, that we should serve him? Why should we serve him? If this people were under my hand, then I would remove Abimelech. I would say to Abimelech, ‘Increase your army, and let us fight.’”

Zebul, Abimelech’s helper who was ruling in Shechem, heard about this uprising and sent word to Abimelech, saying, “Gaal is stirring up the city against you. Therefore, you and the people who are with you should go by night and set an ambush in the field. In the morning, as soon as the sun is up, rush upon the city. When Gaal and the people who are with him come out against you, do what you think is best.”

The next morning, Gaal and Zebul went out and stood in the entrance of the gate of the city. Abimelech and his men came toward the city. When Gaal saw the people, he said to Zebul, “Look, people are coming down from the mountaintops!”

Zebul said to him, “No. You mistake the shadow of the mountains for men.”

“Look,” Gaal said again, “people *are* coming down.”

Then Zebul said to him, “Where is your mouth now, you who said, ‘Who is Abimelech, that we should serve him?’ Aren’t these the people you despised? Go fight with them.”

Gaal quickly gathered the leaders of Shechem and fought with Abimelech, but he didn’t do very well. Abimelech chased Gaal, who ran away from Abimelech. Many Schechemites fell wounded all the way to the city gate.

After that day’s victory, Zebul drove out Gaal and his relatives so that they could not live in Shechem. On the following day, however, another battle ensued in which Abimelech actually destroyed the city and slew its inhabitants. The men of Shechem fled to the house of their god, Baal-Berith, ✓which was also a fortified tower.

Before Abimelech approached this place, he and his men went up to Mount Zalmon (Ebal?). Abimelech took an axe in his hand and cut down a bundle of brushwood and laid it on his shoulder. He said to the men who were with him, “Do what you have seen me do. Hurry.”

So everyone cut down a bundle of brushwood and, following Abimelech’s example, placed it against the tower. Then they set the tower on fire so that all the people, about 1000 men and women, in the tower of Shechem at the house of their god died. Fire from the “bramble” Abimelech had destroyed the “cedars of Lebanon,” the Schechemites who had helped Abimelech slay his brothers. One-half of Jotham’s prophecy was fulfilled.

Fulfilling part two

Abimelech then went on to capture the town of Thebez [locate]. Again, the people had a tower in their town and fled to it for protection. Again, Abimelech attempted to burn down the tower. But as he got close to the door of the fort, a woman on top threw a millstone on Abimelech, crushing his skull but not killing him. Quickly, he called his young armor bearer, commanding him, “Draw your sword and kill me; otherwise people will say, ‘A woman killed him.’” The armor-bearer did as he was told, and Abimelech died.

Thus, Jotham’s prophecy was totally fulfilled. Inhabitants of the area near Shechem, former allies, slew Abimelech.

¹“ . . . promising protection to them as his subjects, requiring their confidence in him, and boasting of the good they should receive from him, as is common with wicked princes at their first entering on their office; but, alas! what shadow or protection can there be in a bramble? if a man attempts to put himself under it for shelter, he will find it will be of no use to him, but harmful, since, the nearer and closer he comes to it, the more he will be scratched and torn by it” (<https://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/gills-exposition-of-the-bible/judges-9-15.html>).

²“ . . . signifying, that if they did not heartily submit to his government, and put confidence in him, and prove faithful to him, they should smart for it, and feel his wrath and vengeance, even the greatest men among them, comparable to the cedars of Lebanon; for thorns and brambles catching fire, as they easily do, or fire being put to them, as weak as they are, and placed under the tallest and strongest cedars, will soon fetch them down to the ground” (<https://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/gills-exposition-of-the-bible/judges-9-15.html>).

³For a shorter version of the story, use the following:

To make a long story short, we’ll tell you that Abimelech came to Shechem, fought against it, and won the battle. About one thousand of the people, in an attempt to escape, holed themselves up in a tower where they usually worshiped their idol. Abimelech went to Mount Ebal (Zalmon) and with an ax cut down some brushwood, which he put on his shoulders. “Hurry. Do what I’m doing,” he told his men.

They all took the brushwood to the tower, placed it against the tower wall, set the wood on fire, and destroyed all those people. Just as Jotham had prophesied, fire from Abimelech destroyed Shechem.

Abimelech then went on to capture the town of Thebez [locate]. Again, the people fled to their tower for

protection. Again, Abimelech attempted to burn down the tower. But as he got close to the door of the fort, a woman on top threw a millstone down on Abimelech, crushing his skull but not killing him. Quickly, he called his young armor bearer, saying, “Draw your sword and execute me; otherwise they will say, ‘A woman killed him.’” The armor bearer did as he was told, and Abimelech died.

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Lessons from this lesson:

- We see Jesus:
Jotham reminds us of Jesus in two ways: he told stories and prophesied. Jesus’ stories were called parables. Jotham was led by God to predict the circumstances of Abimelech’s and Shechem’s fall. Jesus, God Himself, prophesied perfectly, and everything He predicted will be totally fulfilled.
- Stay away from people who would cause you to do wrong.

Activities:

- Play dough: olives, figs, grapes; millstone; tower
- Snack: Olives, figs, grapes, or one of these
- Discuss cedars of Lebanon. Display a branch or twig from a local cedar tree, or display a piece of cedar board as used in cedar closets or chests. We might think of cedar as shrubbery or skinny, tall trees. Cedars in Lebanon, however, are giant in size, grow slowly, and can last 3000 years or more. Read Ezekiel 31:3–7 for a biblical description.

“In ancient times, cedar wood was especially desirable for its aromatic qualities as well as its resistance to decay and bugs. Lebanon was known for its magnificent cedars and was once heavily forested with them. . . . David used cedar wood in building his palace, and it was also used in building the temple, which was almost completely paneled with cedar (<https://www.gotquestions.org/cedars-of-Lebanon.html>).

This 3-minute video shows cedars of Lebanon and tells three characteristics that compare to a Christian: <https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=cedars+of+lebanon&&view=detail&mid=0A5F4D58A28408ED4E120A5F4D58A28408ED4E12&&FORM=VRDGAR&ru=%2Fvideos%2Fsearch%3Fq%3Dcedars%2Bof%2Blebanon%26%26FORM%3DVDVXX>.

- Discuss Abimelech’s role as a judge. Some people think that because Abimelech was so cruel and self-serving in slaying his brothers that he doesn’t qualify to be a judge. However, God used other such judges as well; in fact, He often uses unlikely people in unlikely ways. On the other hand, the Shechemites were worshiping Baal-berith in the tower when they were destroyed by Abimelech; therefore, he brought judgment and destruction upon that worship, even though, perhaps, he did it unintentionally.
- Although no information is given here for this suggestion, the teacher might use this lesson as an opportunity to have a “nature” (let’s call it a “creation”) talk on olive trees, fig trees, grape vines, and even brambles.
- Review questions: (Game: Bring nine twigs (brushwood) to class. Provide a pan or plate—two if playing with teams—on which to place them. When students answer questions correctly, they may place a twig.)
 1. How many sons did Jerubbaal have? [Seventy.]
 2. What proposal did Abimelech present to his uncles in Shechem? [That it would be better to have one of Jerubbaal’s sons rule over them than seventy.]
 3. What kind of character did the men have whom Abimelech hired? [They were worthless, reckless, and had no sense of responsibility.]

4. With Abimelech, what did these worthless men do? [Slew Abimelech's brothers at one stone.]
5. Who escaped being killed? [Jotham, Jerubbaal's youngest son.]
6. In Jotham's story, which plants were asked to rule over the trees? Name two. [Olive tree, fig tree, grapevine, bramble.]
7. What was the warning and prediction in Jotham's story? [Abimelech would destroy the Shechemites, and the Shechemites would destroy Abimelech.]
8. How did Abimelech destroy Shechem? [He destroyed the city; he killed 1000 worshipers of their false god when he burned down their tower.]
9. How did Abimelech lose his life? [A woman dropped a millstone on his head, crushing it; his armor bearer finished the job by stabbing him.]

Memory Verse[s]:

- Jeremiah 45:5—And do you seek great things for yourself? Seek them not.

Handwork:

- Draw an olive tree, a fig tree, and a grape vine on a piece of paper. Tape a small piece of a bramble or thorn to the paper. Label each plant.



Shechem

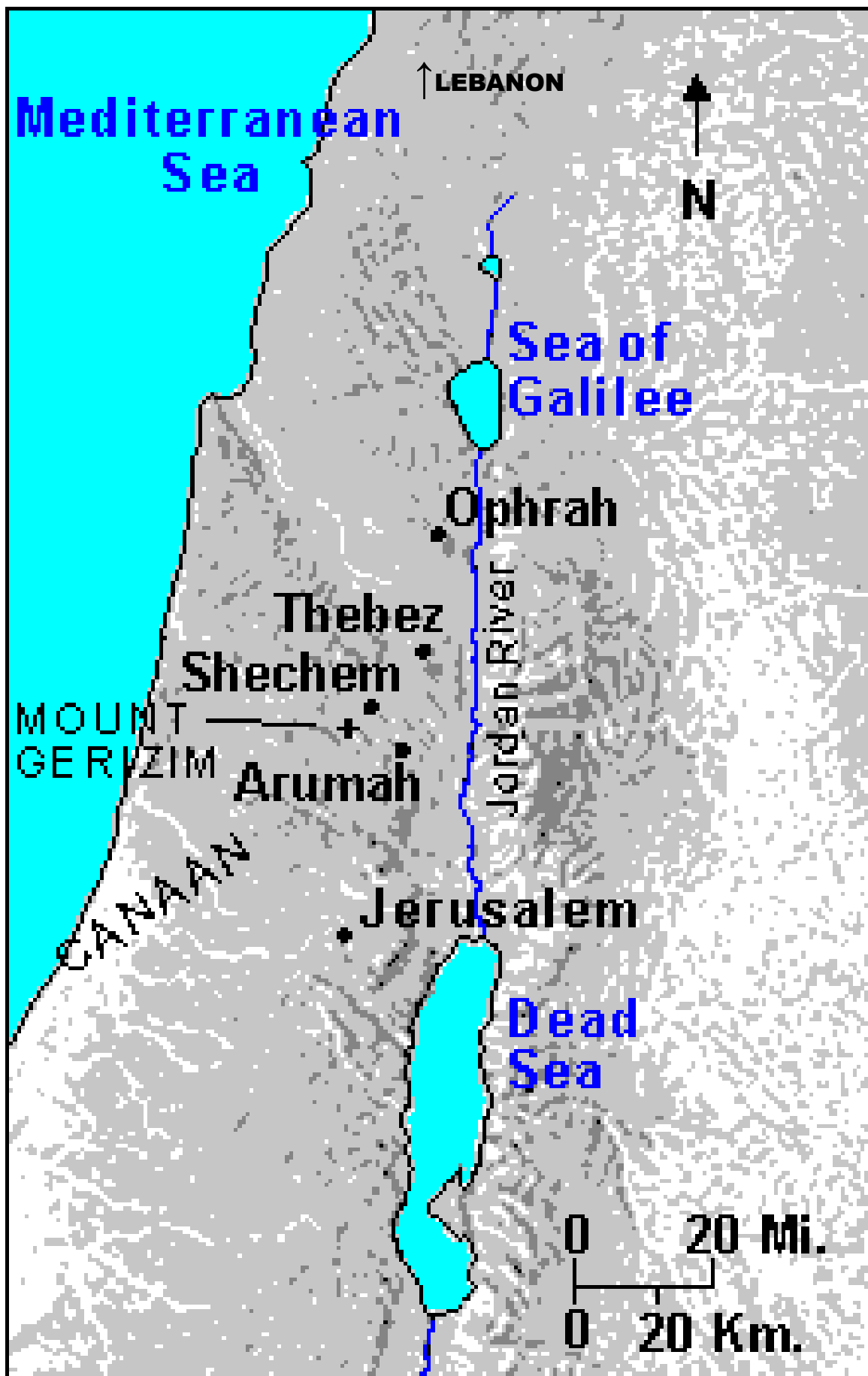
concubine

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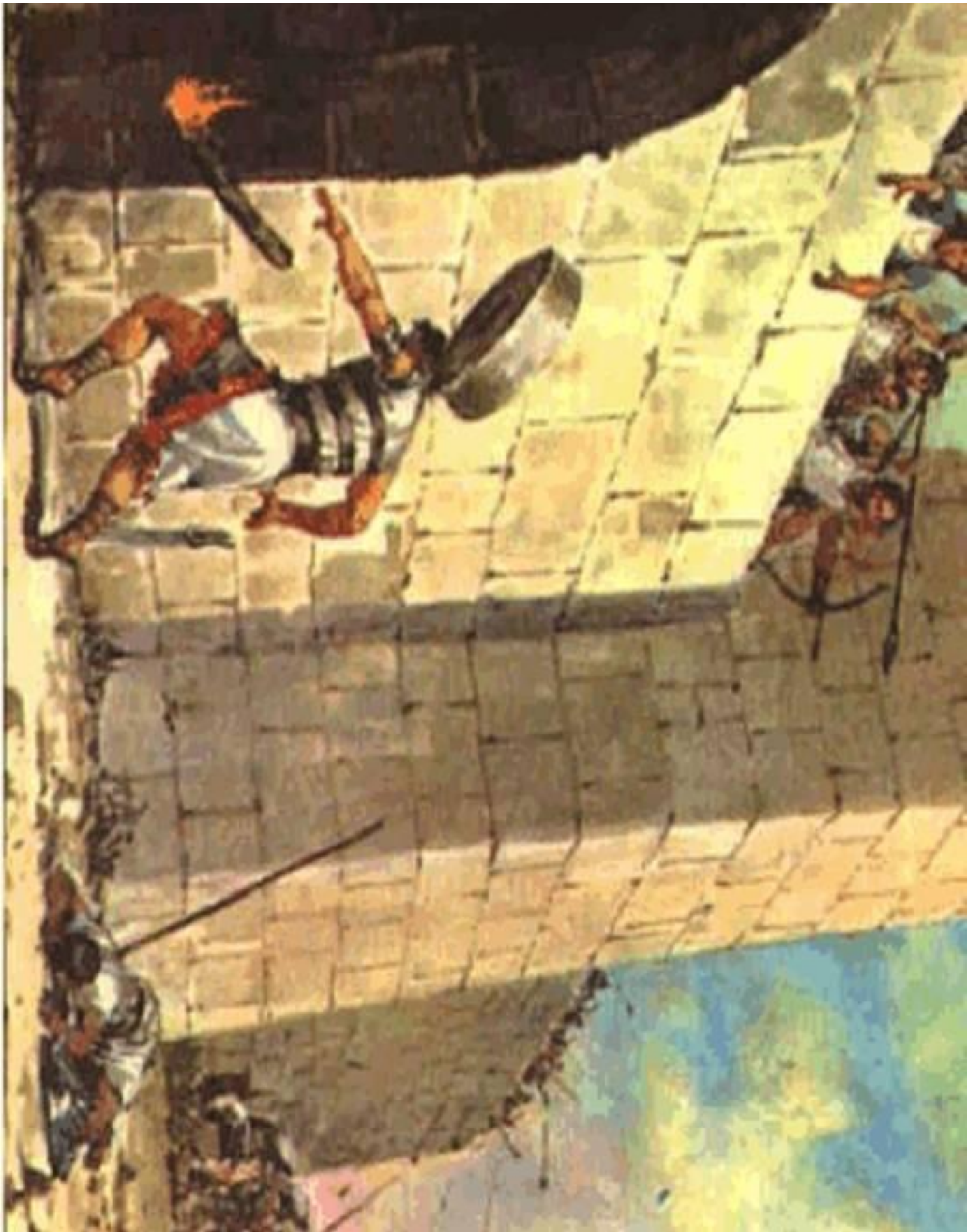


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Ultimate Bible
Picture Collection





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