

Abimelech, the Failed King: Chaoskampf and Masculinity in Judges 9

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Abstract

A literary-theological reading of Judges 9 interprets Abimelech's failed kingship through the lens of hegemonic masculinity in dialogue with ancient Near Eastern Chaoskampf traditions. Using masculinity studies, "hegemonic masculinity" functions here as a heuristic, etic category to map the traits valorized in the Davidic traditions—physical prowess, persuasive speech, male companionship, fertility, and divine favor—and to outline an idealized masculine profile within certain biblical traditions. Abimelech emerges as a deliberate counter type: his partial military successes, reliance on others for speech, association with "empty" men, lack of heirs, and rejection by YHWH construct him as a parody-king whose attempts to reach hegemonic masculinity collapse. Situated within ancient Near Eastern royal ideology, especially the motif of the king as bringer of order, Judges 9 portrays Abimelech as intensifying disorder, particularly in the volatile, liminal setting of Shechem. A brief engagement with contemporary "chaosmos" theory further illuminates how the narrative frames his inability to transform chaos into order as a test of legitimate masculine and royal authority.

Keywords: Hegemonic Masculinity, Abimelech, Judges 9, Chaoskampf, Ancient Near Eastern Royal Ideology, Gender and Kingship

1. Introduction

Judges 9 is an awkward middle point in the book of Judges. The chapter is bookended by stories about judges who sought to liberate Israel from occupation. In contrast, chapter 9 does not feature a liberator but a violent man, Abimelech, with the ambitions of conquest and kingship. Rather than establishing order, he brought chaos to Israel. Because Abimelech was born as an illegitimate son, he was nevertheless determined to attain power, consequently becoming a source of chaos as he challenged the preexisting order. The chapter depicts themes associated with kings and especially usurpers. However, in the case of Abimelech, he almost seems to be a parody of successful kings,² making blunders and mistakes in areas where others did not. Ironically, it is not his conquests that are the most memorable aspect of the story, but his humiliating and anticlimactic death.

This depiction of Abimelech raises serious questions about his qualities as both a kingly figure and a man within the broader cultural world of the ancient Near East. When compared to a more idealized king, such as David, Abimelech appears to lack many of the traits associated with masculinity. To explore this contrast, I apply a masculinist framework to assess Abimelech's effectiveness as a king and a hegemonic man. I also examine the royal ideals of divine appointment and the creation of order—and argue that these attributes likewise function as tenets for hegemonic masculinity in the biblical narrative.

It must be acknowledged that the portrait of Abimelech may be a result of the way in which the text was preserved. This study does not presuppose a single unified Deuteronomistic author responsible for the composition of Judges 9 but treats it as a text shaped within broader Deuteronomistic traditions that share theological and ideological concerns. A full investigation of compositional issues lies beyond the scope of this study; therefore, I limit my analysis to Abimelech as he is presented in the received text.

² By “parody-king,” I mean a figure who imitates the external markers of kingship while structurally inverting their function. Parody here does not denote humor but a narrative strategy of ironic imitation, in which familiar royal motifs are redeployed to expose failure, incompetence, or contradiction. Abimelech's kingship thus functions as a satirical inversion of legitimate rule rather than a simple absence of it.

2. Method of Masculinist Studies

Masculinist studies and interpretations are a relatively recent development, only gaining interest in the late twentieth century. Initially, masculinist perspectives arose as a response against social sciences that generalized masculinity as a homogenous, fixed concept. The masculinist method argued that masculinity is not a singular idea, but diverse and constantly shifting.³ As the field of men's studies began to expand, the focus turned to how the ideas of masculinity were created and maintained by societies.⁴ Rather than taking the current perceptions of masculinity for granted, the field aimed to identify the roles currently assigned to masculinity and how they came to be. In contrast to generalized definitions of masculinity, the field sought to specify certain masculinities within limited contexts.⁵ This is due to the fact that the criteria for what constitutes an "ideal man" greatly differs depending on the society and era. In late twentieth-century Western societies, societal expectations still upheld the previous generation's notion that men should avoid doing roles which women usually take.⁶ Men were also supposed to be ambitious and independent, being able to sustain themselves.⁷ Men were also expected to focus on being prosperous; it was not enough for them to be "satisfactory," but they should have also strived to be the best.⁸ Men were likewise expected to be assertive and dominant, displaying aggression, albeit in a controlled manner.⁹ These characteristics make up what could be considered the tenets of modern-day Western hegemonic masculinity. This form of masculinity might be considered hegemonic because it establishes the way in which the "idealized men"

³ Joseph H. Pleck, *The Myth of Masculinity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), 16–21.

⁴ Susan E. Haddox, "Masculinity Studies of the Hebrew Bible: The First Two Decades," *Currents in Biblical Research* 14, no. 2 (2016), 176–206.

⁵ Harry Brod, "The Case for Men's Studies," in *The Making of Masculinities: The New Men's Studies*, ed. Harry Brod (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1987), 40.

⁶ James A. Doyle, *The Male Experience*. 2nd ed. (Dubuque, IA: Wm. C. Brown Publishers, 1989).

⁷ Mike Donaldson, "What Is Hegemonic Masculinity," *Theory and Society* 22, no. 5 (1993), 643–57.

⁸ Alfie Kohn, *No Contest: The Case Against Competition* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986), 168–69.

⁹ Arthur Brittan, *Masculinity and Power* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 78–80.

should act and maintain their power.¹⁰ Men feel the need to admire and aspire to these attributes, further solidifying the “legitimacy” of this hegemonic masculinity.¹¹ While the men who conform are elevated, those who do not fit are considered as outcasts.¹²

Just as in modern-day Western society, the ancient Near Eastern world also held certain ideals and expectations for men. While no extant ancient Near Eastern text explicitly states what their views on hegemonic masculinity were or what their expected male roles were, their masculine ideals could be inferred from the literature, particularly texts regarding kings and leaders. These texts about kings might give useful insight into ancient Near Eastern ideas of idealized masculinity, since kings were often deified and revered. Thus, the character of a successful king may serve as a good metric to measure the masculinity of the men.

As far as the Hebrew Bible is concerned, King David could be considered a selectively constructed “gold standard” for kings and masculinity—but only in a qualified, literary sense, as a retrospective benchmark within certain Deuteronomistic emphases rather than a comprehensive moral ideal.¹³ Although

¹⁰ Donaldson, “What Is Hegemonic Masculinity,” 643–46.

¹¹ It should be noted that the ideas regarding hegemonic masculinity and masculine studies in general are still developing. Some scholars have rejected the idea that there is a single hegemonic masculinity, instead adopting a more pluralistic and diverse view of masculinity. Some even disconnect gender from expected roles of men, since the roles of men are complex and sometimes ambiguous. For more discussion on masculinity, see Todd W. Reeser, “Concepts of Masculinity and Masculinity Studies,” in *Configuring Masculinity in Theory and Literary Practice*, ed. Stefan Horlacher (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 11–38.

¹² In addition, feminist, womanist, and other scholars have claimed a close association between Western hegemonic masculinity in the modern era and misogynistic, sexist, and homophobic views. However, some scholars have pointed out that these connections may be too simplistic and lacks proper nuance when dealing with the multifaceted nature of masculinity. For more, see Brod, “The Case for Men’s Studies,” 7. Moreover, other scholars have criticized the generalization of hegemonic masculinity, asserting that it has been particularly harmful for certain groups, such as African American men. For more, see Ronald Neal, “Engaging Abrahamic Masculinity: Race, Religion, and the Measure of Manhood,” *Cross Currents* 61, no. 4 (2011), 557–64.

¹³ By “gold standard,” I refer not to an uncritical or comprehensive moral ideal, but to a literary construction operative within certain strands of the Deuteronomistic tradition. In this sense, “gold standard” designates a rhetorical benchmark rather than a claim about David’s moral perfection. The narrative selectively idealizes particular royal and masculine traits—such as military competence, persuasive authority, dynastic continuity, and divine favor—even while preserving traditions that portray David as morally compromised, violent, or

David postdates Abimelech in narrative time, Judges 9 is preserved within a Deuteronomistic literary horizon in which David functions as a retrospective benchmark for evaluating leadership. That is, the figure of David comes to embody a set of idealized royal and masculine traits against which earlier or failed leaders can be implicitly measured. This retrospective logic is already evident within the biblical corpus itself, most notably in 2 Samuel 11:21, where Abimelech's death is invoked as a negative exemplum in a Davidic context, indicating that his story had become a paradigmatic warning about failed military leadership.

David's importance, therefore, does not lie in the claim that all Israelite men historically modeled themselves on him, but in the fact that the biblical tradition presents his kingship as a normative point of reference for evaluating rule. Because David is portrayed as the one who establishes order after the instability of the judges and the failures of Saul, his characterization provides a particularly useful heuristic for identifying the traits associated with idealized masculinity in the Hebrew Bible.¹⁴ Thus, by observing the features emphasized in David's portrayal, one can reconstruct a literary model of hegemonic masculinity against which Abimelech's deficiencies become visible.

3. What Makes the Ideal Man?

In order to observe Abimelech's character through the ancient Near Eastern framework of masculinity, one must understand the ideals attributed to men in that context. For this reason, King David provides the most fitting model for comparison.¹⁵ To begin, David J. A. Clines offers a list of characteristics

ambiguous. I therefore use the term heuristically, to describe an internal literary norm that functions as a point of comparison for evaluating leadership figures, rather than to suggest that the Hebrew Bible uniformly presents David as an uncontested embodiment of masculine virtue.

¹⁴ David J. A. Clines, *Interested Parties: The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 212–41.

¹⁵ Before proceeding, it is important to clarify that “hegemonic masculinity” is used here as an analytic category applied retroactively to ancient materials, not as an emic term or a self-conscious ancient ideology. I am not suggesting that ancient Israel or the wider ancient Near East articulated a unified theory of masculinity comparable to modern gender theory. Rather, I employ “hegemonic masculinity” heuristically, as a way of describing the constellation of traits that appear to be privileged, valorized, or portrayed as normative within the textual

exhibited by King David: the fighting male, the persuasive male, the beautiful male, the bonding male, the womanless male, and the musical male.¹⁶ Additional traits observed by other scholars include fertility and self-control.¹⁷ For the purposes of this comparison, only the characteristics of the fighting male, persuasive male, bonding male, and fertility will be utilized.

One of the foremost characteristics of masculinity in the Hebrew Bible is that of גבור חיל. The noun גבור can be translated as “warrior” or “mighty one,” with emphasis on physical strength.¹⁸ The adjective חיל specifies “strength” or “valor,” often describing physical might but sometimes also economic prowess.¹⁹ However, when used together, the phrase typically signifies “a mighty man of valor.” Thus, physical strength and combat prowess could be seen as core tenets of hegemonic masculinity in ancient Israel.²⁰

David solidly fulfills this requirement of physical strength for masculinity with his extensive history of combat and victories. More than simply being battle-hardened, the text indicates that David possessed “ultimate masculinity,” as he consistently triumphed over other men through his physical prowess.²¹ For instance, when David fought against Goliath:

ויחזק דוד מן־הפלישתי בקלע ובאבן

“So David prevailed over the Philistine with a sling and a stone...” (1 Sam 17:50)²²

tradition. As several scholars have noted, applying contemporary gender-theoretical frameworks to premodern societies requires caution, since ancient masculinities were multiple, context-dependent, and not always systematic (see fn. 10–11). Nevertheless, when used carefully, this framework provides a productive lens for analyzing how texts construct, idealize, and contrast masculinities—particularly in narratives that juxtapose figures such as David and Abimelech.

¹⁶ Clines, *Interested Parties*, 215–28.

¹⁷ Jon-Michael Carman, “Abimelech the Manly Man? Judges 9:1–57 and the Performance of Hegemonic Masculinity,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 43, no. 3 (2019), 305.

¹⁸ Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament with an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1951), 150.

¹⁹ BDB, 298–99.

²⁰ Kelly J. Murphy, *Rewriting Masculinity: Gideon, Men, and Might* (New York: Oxford Academic, 2019), 42.

²¹ Clines, *Interested Parties*, 216–19.

²² All English translations are from the NRSVUE.

Here, the verb חזק describes David's victory in a comparative sense. Goliath's masculinity is diminished while David's is enhanced, as David overpowers him through physical means.

In addition to physical strength, a man should be able to achieve objectives through diplomatic speaking. A reoccurring theme among respected men of the Hebrew Bible is their capacity of persuasion.²³ This persuasiveness may take various forms, from charismatic leadership to strategic negotiation.

David satisfies this principle as well. When Saul commands that someone skilled in playing the lyre be found, David is described as:

וגבור חיל ואיש מלחמה ונבון דבר

"a man of valor, a warrior, prudent in speech..." (1 Sam 16:18)

According to this verse, David is thus described not only as גבור חיל, a mighty man of valor, and איש מלחמה, a man of war or warrior, but also as נבון דבר, a man of words. Thus, David was recognized to not only be a physically strong man but also an intelligent and discerning man.

Not only was David himself astute, but the women associated with David demonstrate wisdom and rhetorical skill. When David was being hunted by Saul, Michal protects him with two carefully crafted lies, delaying her father long enough for David to escape.²⁴ Abigail persuades David to spare her household, averting bloodshed caused by her husband's folly.²⁵

Another significant characteristic of ideal masculinity is companionship with other men. This is not emotional bonding as such, but comradeship forged in action and shared struggle.²⁶ It is a friendship of unbreakable loyalty and allegiance between male companions. This romanticized bond between men going through a common struggle or adventure together is present in literature

²³ Murphy, *Rewriting Masculinity*, 42.

²⁴ Jo Ann Hackett, "1 and 2 Samuel," in *The Women's Bible Commentary*, eds. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), 90–91.

²⁵ Clines additionally writes that the presence of these wise women with these characteristics does not invalidate the trait of persuasiveness as a tenet of hegemonic masculinity. He argues that this misconception possibly arises from the insistence that masculinity and roles being fulfilled by women are mutually exclusive. Clines, *Interested Parties*, 220–21.

²⁶ Clines, *Interested Parties*, 223–25.

throughout history,²⁷ and it is also prominent in the Hebrew Bible. David enjoys such companionship with Jonathan, who remains loyal to him despite the threat David poses to Saul's throne.

Beyond Jonathan, David's comradeship with his "band of mighty men" testifies to his capacity for masculine companionship and leadership. Second Samuel 23:8–38 lists thirty-seven men who were considered to be David's mighty warriors. For example:

ובניהו בן־יהוידע בן־איש־[חיל] רב־פעלים מקבצאל

"Benaiah son of Jehoiada was a valiant warrior from Kabzeel, a doer of great deeds..." (2 Sam 23:20)

This and the following verses highlight the courageous exploits of Benaiah, describing him as a *איש חיל רב־פעלים*, a man of strength and great deeds. David himself is physically strong, but the men with whom he shares a bond are also strong. This not only shows David's trustworthy company, but also that David had the prowess and leadership to command such mighty men.

Additional traits of hegemonic masculinity include securing posterity and exercising restraint, whether in violence or sexuality.²⁸ David fulfills both: he produces heirs who perpetuate his legacy and kingdom, as well as overall keeping himself "clean from women."²⁹ In these respects, David is shown to be the "ideal man" for the ancient Israelites, coming closest to the idea of hegemonic masculinity. It should be noted, however, that the portrayal of David's masculinity used here is not a comprehensive assessment of every aspect of David's character. Rather, it draws upon the idealizing strands within the Davidic traditions—particularly those preserved in royal, theological, and heroic narratives. Other passages in the Samuel corpus present David in morally fraught, violent, or even dysfunctional contexts that complicate a singular picture of "ideal masculinity." My use of David as a comparative model therefore reflects a constructed literary ideal within certain textual emphases, not a claim that the Hebrew Bible uniformly presents David as an uncontested

²⁷ Dorothy Hammond and Alta Jablow. "Gilgamesh and the Sundance Kid: The Myth of Male Friendship," in *The Making of Masculinities: The New Men's Studies*, ed. Harry Brod (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1987), 241–45.

²⁸ Carman, "Abimelech the manly man?," 305.

²⁹ Clines, *Interested Parties*, 225–27.

embodiment of masculine virtue. Acknowledging this complexity allows David to function as a heuristic benchmark against which Abimelech's failed masculinity can be analyzed.

4. Abimelech's Masculinity

Compared to the characteristics of David, Abimelech severely lacks many of the core tenets for hegemonic masculinity. To begin with the trait of physical strength and combat, looking at Abimelech's achievements in battle, the results seem to be mixed. Initially, Abimelech appears to be quite successful in his attempt to seize power:

ויהרג את־אחיו בני־ירבעל שבעים איש על־אבן אחת

"And [he] killed his brothers the sons of Jerubbaal, seventy men, on one stone..." (Judg 9:5)

Since Abimelech's origin was that of a lesser son to Gideon, he needed to get rid of the seventy legitimate sons in order to secure the throne for himself.³⁰ This action is reminiscent of other usurpers or kings attempting to establish their rule and legitimacy:

ויקחו את־בני המלך וישחטו שבעים איש

"they took the king's sons and killed them, seventy persons" (2 Kgs 10:7)

In this case, as Jehu was rebelling and attempting to seize the throne for himself, he first killed Joram and Ahaziah, the kings of Israel and Judah respectively. Afterwards, in this verse, Jehu proceeded to slaughter the seventy sons of Ahab.³¹ Compared to הרג as used in the case of Abimelech, which might give an image of disorder and chaos during the killings, שחט might imply that Jehu had proper control of the situation and that he was methodical in the executions. The Deuteronomistic tradition may present a distinction to highlight the difference between a competent king and an improper usurper.

³⁰ Carman, "Abimelech the Manly Man?," 305–6.

³¹ The verb used in this verse, שחט, can be translated as "to slaughter," usually used in the context of killing animals for food or for a sacrifice, BDB, 1006.

Similarly, the Tel Dan inscription describes Hazael's rise to power in Aram and his slaughter of seventy enemy kings.³² For both Jehu and Hazael, the opponents that they killed may not literally have numbered seventy, but this number would have represented a complete eradication of any potential political opponent.³³ Both Jehu and Hazael were successful in establishing their legitimacy after removing the threats to their power.

Initially, Abimelech also seems to enjoy a measure of success. Following the slaughter of the sons of Jerubbaal, the lords of Shechem and Beth-millo crown Abimelech as their king. Shechem's role in this moment is not incidental. As both an ancient cultic center and a politically contested site marked by shifting allegiances, Shechem often functioned as a liminal space where competing claims to authority were negotiated.³⁴ The political and ethnic plurality made Shechem a fertile environment for power-brokering but also inherently unstable as a royal base. The identification of the bêt El-berît in Judges 9 with the Canaanite fortress temple (Temple 2b) further underscores its role as a cultic center whose religious and political loyalties were in flux.³⁵ The survival of Jotham proved not only problematic to Abimelech's kingship, but also for his hegemonic masculinity. Despite being the youngest son of Gideon and likely younger than Abimelech, Jotham nonetheless represents a more

³² Although the *editio princeps* reconstructs the phrase "seventy kings," this reading is not universally accepted, and the number is widely understood as symbolic rather than strictly numerical. Matthew J. Suriano, "The Apology of Hazel: A Literary and Historical Analysis of the Tel Dan Inscription," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 66, no. 3 (2007), 167, 173 fn. 67.

³³ Suriano, "The Apology of Hazael," 167–68.

³⁴ Archaeological and historical studies suggest that Shechem retained strong Canaanite affiliations through the Late Bronze Age and into Iron I, with a mixed population that likely included Canaanite elites, local agrarian groups, and emerging Israelite elements. These data are cited here as contextual background rather than as direct historical proof, helping to explain why the city plausibly functions in Judges 9 as a liminal and politically unstable setting. See Edward F. Campbell Jr., "The Amarna Letters and the Amarna Period," *The Biblical Archaeologist* 23, no. 1 (1960): 8; E. Sellin, "Die Ausgrabung von Sichem: Kurze vorläufige Mitteilung über die Arbeit im Sommer 1926," *Zeitschrift des Deutschen Palästina-Vereins* 49, no. 4 (1926): 304–20; Brendon C. Benz, *The Land Before the Kingdom of Israel: A History of the Southern Levant and the People Who Populated It* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2016), 183, 242–43.

³⁵ Lawrence E. Toombs et al., "The Fourth Campaign at Balâṭah (Shechem)," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 169 (1963): 29.

legitimate heir.³⁶ Moreover, although Abimelech nearly succeeded in his political coup, his failure to eliminate all the sons of Gideon signifies his inadequacy as a warrior.

Abimelech's military campaigns also show ambivalent outcomes. Again, as with his coup, Abimelech initially displays success.

וירדפהו אבימלך וינס מפניו ויפלו חללים רבים עד־פתח השער

“Abimelech chased him, and he fled before him. Many fell wounded, up to the entrance of the gate.” (Judg 9:40)

ואבימלך נלחם בעיר כל היום ההוא וילכד את־העיר ואת־העם אשר־בה הרג ויתן את־העיר ויזרעה מלח

“Abimelech fought against the city all that day; he took the city and killed the people who were in it, and he razed the city and sowed it with salt.” (Judg 9:45)

He defeated Gaal, routing his forces, and besieged and destroyed the city of Shechem. He showed his prowess in these battles by effectively conquering and brutally burning down these cities.³⁷ Within these engagements, Abimelech personally displayed his strength as a warrior, as the text uses the verb רדף.³⁸ However, his triumph over his foes was not thorough:

ויגרש זבל את־געל

“and Zebul drove out Gaal...” (Judg 9:41)

Like Jotham, the text shows that Abimelech was unable to kill Gaal. Instead, Abimelech and his forces were only able to drive Gaal out of Shechem (גרש). Compared to David's expansive record of battlefield victories, Abimelech's failures to rout his opponents utterly tarnish his reputation as a warrior.

Moreover, Abimelech's greatest humiliation in battle comes during his besiegement of Thebez.

³⁶ Carman, “Abimelech the Manly Man?,” 305–6.

³⁷ Zev Farber, “Struck Down by a Woman: Abimelech's Humiliating Intertextual Death,” in *Reading Gender in Judges*, eds. Shelley L. Birdsong, J. Cornelis de Vos, and Hyun Chul Paul Kim (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2023), 121–36.

³⁸ Carman, “Abimelech the Manly Man?,” 306.

ויבא אבימלך עדהמגדל וילחם בו ויגש עד־פתח המגדל לשרפו באש
ותשלך אשה אחת פלח רכב על־ראש אבימלך ותרץ את־גלגלתו

“Abimelech came to the tower and fought against it and came near to the entrance of the tower to burn it with fire. But a certain woman threw an upper millstone on Abimelech’s head and crushed his skull.” (Judg 9:52–53)

He committed the classical military blunder of getting too close to the besieged structure and having a projectile dropped upon him from above. Such defensive measures were common in siege warfare from ancient times through the medieval era. Oftentimes, gates and sometimes even walls had dedicated holes, through which defenders could drop objects, pour liquids, or shoot arrows at an attacker.³⁹ Since this tactic was commonly used during a siege, a competent commander such as David would have realized the danger of getting too close to an enemy fortification during a siege.⁴⁰ Moreover, the Lachish Relief depicts the Neo-Assyrian King Sennacherib commanding his forces at the siege of Lachish while seated on a throne far from the walls, which possibly indicates that a proper king would have known to avoid close proximity to the fortifications.⁴¹ However, Abimelech was either overconfident or foolish and approached near enough to the tower for a woman to drop an upper millstone upon him, fatally wounding him.

This was not only a devastating blow to Abimelech’s head but to his hegemonic masculinity as well.⁴² In the ancient Near East, a common concept of warfare was the “feminization” of the defeated. While the victors would maintain or even enhance their masculinity, those who were overpowered would be humiliated and sometimes even referred to as female. For instance, the “Treaty of Aššur-nerari V with Mati’ilu, King of Arpad” depicts threats of the soldiers

³⁹ Sidney Toy, *History of Fortification from 3000 BC to Ad 1700* (London: Pen & Sword Military Classics, 2006), 103–4.

⁴⁰ This idea might be supported by the dialogue between David and Joab in 2 Samuel 11 when David secretly orders for Uriah to be killed in combat. Both David and Joab seem to be aware of the dangers of drawing too close to enemy fortifications during a siege because of the danger of projectiles.

⁴¹ British Museum, “Relief,” The British Museum, accessed December 28, 2025. https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1856-0909-14_7.

⁴² Cynthia R. Chapman, *The Gendered Language of Warfare in the Israelite-Assyrian Encounter* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2004), 49–52.

becoming female if they would defy Aššur-nerari.⁴³ In addition to being defeated, Abimelech was fatally wounded by a woman, increasing his humiliation and his “feminization.”⁴⁴

Abimelech, desperate to preserve what little was left of his masculinity, orders his arms-bearer (הנער נשא כליו) to kill him with his own sword, so that people would not remember that he had been killed by a woman. Although the arms-bearer carried out Abimelech’s command, it seems that Abimelech posthumously failed in this regard as well. In 2 Samuel 11, the messages between David and Joab suggest that the story of Abimelech had become a classic warning on how not to conduct siege warfare.⁴⁵

מִי־הָכָה אֶת־אֲבִימֶלֶךְ בֶּן־יִרְבֵּשֶׁת הַלֹּוא־אִשָּׁה

“Who killed Abimelech son of Jerubbaal? Did not a woman...” (2 Sam 11:21)

Unfortunately for Abimelech, despite his best attempts to cover it up, the fact that he had been killed by a woman was firmly embedded in the story.

While Abimelech’s combat ability might have been mediocre, his speaking ability was also dismal. David was described as discerning and wise (נבון דבר). However, Abimelech does not reach this standard. He does not seem able to convince the lords of Shechem on his own:

וַיִּדְבְּרוּ אֲחֵי־אָמֹם עָלָיו בְּאָזְנֵי כָל־בְּעָלֵי שָׁכֶם אֶת כָּל־הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה

“So his mother’s kinsfolk spoke all these words on his behalf in the hearing of all the lords of Shechem...” (Judg 9:3)

⁴³ Simo Papola and Kazuko Watanabe. *Neo-Assyrian Treaties and Loyalty Oaths*, State Archives of Assyria 2 (Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1988), 12.

⁴⁴ The feminization of Abimelech in his death is also amplified when taking into account the position he was in. The woman was above Abimelech when she fatally struck him in the head with the upper millstone. This situation would have been the opposite of what would have been expected of a hegemonic man. Usually, the expectation would be that the man is above, with the woman being below, as in a sexual encounter. However, since Abimelech was below the woman when he was mortally wounded, he had taken the “woman’s position.” For more, see Ken Stone, “Gender Criticism: The Un-Manning of Abimelech,” in *Judges & Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, ed. Gale A. Yee (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 183–201.

⁴⁵ Farber, “Struck Down by a Woman,” 131–34.

The brothers of Abimelech's mother (אחיי־אמו) must speak on his behalf to the lords of Shechem. Abimelech's need for someone else to speak for him stands in stark contrast to Jotham and Gaal, both of whom personally and directly address the lords of Shechem. Additionally, Abimelech's speeches are quite short when compared to his rivals, Jotham and Gaal, or even Abimelech's officer, Zebul.⁴⁶ Overall, Abimelech's speech is neither persuasive nor eloquent. The focus on Abimelech's lack of speaking ability within the text as preserved further emphasizes the contrast between able and incompetent leaders.

In addition to these shortcomings, Abimelech also fails in terms of male companionship. Though Abimelech does have some comrades and followers, they are described as אנשים ריקים. While the adjective ריק usually holds the meaning of "empty," in this context of describing the men following Abimelech, the adjective can also take the meaning of "unprincipled."⁴⁷ Unlike David, who shared bonds with "men of valor," Abimelech was in the company of the reckless.

Moreover, while David had comrades who were loyal to him even to death, the devotion of Abimelech's followers was questionable at best. Zebul, Abimelech's officer, does not seem to be in complete accord with his superior, possibly having to take secret or even deceitful actions during the battle against Gaal.⁴⁸ Moreover, when Abimelech was fatally struck and asks his arms-bearer to kill him, the arms-bearer does not hesitate to cut down his lord.

Furthermore, after Abimelech's death, his soldiers stop fighting and return to their homes, effectively ending Abimelech's kingdom immediately. Abimelech had no children to carry on his legacy or his newfound kingdom, and any comrade who might potentially become a successor abandoned him. Meanwhile, David successfully established his dynasty through his son and successor Solomon. Thus, even after David's death, his kingdom was secure.

⁴⁶ Jotham speaks 199 words, Gaal 49, and Zebul 66, while Abimelech only speaks 41 words in all. Carman, "Abimelech the Manly Man?" 309–10.

⁴⁷ Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner. *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*. (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 2553–54.

⁴⁸ Carman offers that Zebul may have been acting independently to gain power for himself while deceiving Abimelech. This interpretation would show that even Abimelech's closest aides were opportunistic and untrustworthy. Carman, "Abimelech the Manly Man?," 311–12.

However, due to Abimelech's lack of children and truly loyal followers, Abimelech's kingship has no longevity.

Abimelech tried desperately to seize power and to become the hegemonic man. He took every measure possible, from slaughtering seventy of his brothers to starting a civil war and mercilessly slaughtering citizens. Despite these brutal actions, Abimelech fell short of the ideals for a man and a king. Compared to David, Abimelech was a mediocre warrior and tactician, was not eloquent, lacked meaningful male companions, and was unsuccessful in preserving his kingdom through children. Although Abimelech attempted to reach the status of a hegemonic male, he failed on all fronts, even becoming feminized in the process.

5. Divine Favor

Across the significant figures of the Hebrew Bible, one important aspect they share is divine appointment. From the patriarchs to the kings, these men⁴⁹ were shown to be chosen and in direct communication with YHWH.⁵⁰ Even Moses, who needed his brother Aaron to speak on his behalf, had a close relationship and favor from YHWH. However, merely being in contact with YHWH does not seem adequate to indicate a leader's prowess; the way in which the leader and YHWH interact is critical. A lesser leader appears to be negatively impacted by the spirit of YHWH, while competent leaders maintain responsibility and restraint. Thus, the verbs should be closely studied to determine whether a leader was divinely favored. David is a prime example showing a clear relationship with YHWH:

ותצלח רוח־יהוה אל־דוד מהיום ההוא ומעלה

“And the spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward.” (1 Sam 16:13)

In this instance, the spirit of YHWH was upon David, מהיום ההוא ומעלה, “from that day and onward.” Though the spirit of YHWH had come upon

⁴⁹ On divinely chosen women, see especially Deborah in Judges 4.

⁵⁰ Murphy, “Mighty Warriors? Men and Masculinities,” 37–66.

many other figures before David, there are only a few instances where the verb *צלח* is specifically used:

ותצלח עליו רוח יהוה וישסעהו כשסע הגדי

“The spirit of the LORD rushed on him, and he tore the lion apart bare-handed as one might tear apart a kid.” (Judg 14:6)

ותצלח עליו רוח יהוה וירד אשקלון ויך מהם שלשים איש ויקח את־חליצותם ויתן החליפות למגידי החידה ויחר אפו ויעל בית אביהו

“Then the spirit of the LORD rushed on him, and he went down to Ashkelon. He killed thirty men of the town, took their spoil, and gave the festal garments to those who had explained the riddle. In hot anger he went back to his father’s house.” (Judg 14:19)

In these verses, the spirit of YHWH rushes upon Samson. The result of this sudden possession is unbridled brutality. The first verse, Judges 14:6, uses the verb *שסע*, describing Samson violently tearing apart a lion. In the second verse, Judges 14:19, after the spirit of YHWH comes upon him, Samson goes on a killing spree, annihilating thirty men in Ashkelon. After this massacre, Samson returns home, *ויחר אפו*, in furious or burning anger.

There is another figure with whom the verb *צלח* was used to describe a possession by the spirit of YHWH:

ויבאו שם הגבעתה והנה חבלי־נבאים לקראתו ותצלח עליו רוח אלהים ויתנבא בתוכם

“When they were going from there to Gibeah, a band of prophets met him, and the spirit of God possessed him, and he fell into a prophetic frenzy along with them.” (1 Sam 10:10)

In this verse, when the spirit of YHWH rushes upon Saul, the verb *ויתנבא* is used to describe what Saul did. However, Saul’s prophesying with the spirit of YHWH is starkly contrasted by the next two occurrences of the verb *צלח*:

ותצלח רוח־אלהים על־שאול (בשמעו) [כשמעו] את־הדברים האלה ויחר אפו מאד

“And the spirit of God came upon Saul in power when he heard these words, and his anger was greatly kindled.” (1 Sam 11:6)

ויהי ממחרת ותצלח רוח אלהים רעהו אל־שאול ויתנבא בתוך־הבית

“The next day an evil spirit from God rushed upon Saul, and he raved within his house” (1 Sam 18:10)

First Samuel 11:6 is reminiscent of Judges 14:9. Similar to Samson, Saul was also greatly angered or burning with anger. Consumed by this fiery rage, Saul slaughtered (נָתַח) a pair of oxen in the next verse. 1 Samuel 18 portrays Saul in an even worse light. When the evil spirit of YHWH entered into Saul, the text again uses the verb יִתְנַבֵּא. Like 1 Samuel 10:10, the verbal root נָבֵא is used. However, in 1 Samuel 18:10, the verb is in the Hithpael stem, which can be translated as “to rage.”⁵¹ Therefore, after entering into this state of fury, Saul attempted to kill David. Compared to both Samson and Saul, David was not excessively violent after the spirit of YHWH rushed upon him. Thus, on the one hand, David demonstrates the restraint from unnecessary brutality that is crucial for masculinity.⁵² On the other hand, David’s peaceful reaction to the spirit of YHWH might signify that he was especially divinely favored, particularly in comparison with Saul.

In contrast to David who had the spirit of YHWH rush upon him, in Abimelech’s case there is no such occurrence. In fact, there is no mention of Abimelech having any sense of piety or relationship with YHWH. The only interaction between Abimelech and God is a negative one:

וַיִּשְׁלַח אֱלֹהִים רוּחַ רָעָה בֵּין אֲבִימֶלֶךְ וּבֵין בְּעָלֵי שֵׁכֶם וַיִּבְגְּדוּ בְּעַלֵּי־שֵׁכֶם בְּאֲבִימֶלֶךְ

“But God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the lords of Shechem, and the lords of Shechem dealt treacherously with Abimelech.” (Judg 9:23)

The spirit of God in this instance is not one that blesses or benefits Abimelech, but one that brings discord. Even for Saul’s case, the spirit of YHWH initially caused him to prophesy. And in Samson’s story, the spirit of YHWH gave Samson strength to overpower his enemies. Thus, it could be seen that Abimelech was fully rejected by YHWH.

⁵¹ HALOT, 1648–49.

⁵² Stephen M. Wilson, *Making Men: The Male Coming-of-Age Theme in the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 32–33.

6. The Bringer of Order

Though the model of Davidic masculinity outlined above captures many of the traits associated with ideal manhood in the Hebrew Bible, it can be further illuminated by attending to how ancient Near Eastern royal ideology conceptualized the relationship between masculinity and order. In many ancient Near Eastern traditions, the legitimacy of kingship is expressed through the capacity to restrain chaos and establish stability. This symbolic logic—often described under the rubric of *Chaoskampf*—provides a cultural framework within which masculine authority, political order, and divine favor are closely intertwined. Read against this background, Judges 9 does not merely portray Abimelech as morally deficient or politically inept, but as a figure whose failure consists in his inability to perform the fundamental royal-masculine task of transforming instability into order.

This point can be further clarified through the modern theoretical analogy of “chaosmos.”⁵³ In chaosmos theory, chaos and cosmos belong on a single continuum: chaosmos designates a liminal condition in which disorder and order coexist, and in which systems become highly sensitive to internal disturbances. At such moments, even small interventions can redirect the system toward a new equilibrium or, alternatively, intensify instability.⁵⁴ Rather than presupposing a strict opposition between chaos and order, chaosmos highlights the dynamic process through which order may—or may not—emerge from disruption. Although ancient texts do not operate with this modern framework, the analogy helps articulate how moments of instability function as critical thresholds within narrative systems.

⁵³ Chaosmos is not introduced here as an additional analytical framework in its own right, but as a heuristic clarification of why the capacity to generate and sustain order functions as a criterion of royal masculinity—a logic that Judges 9 ultimately inverts in its portrayal of Abimelech.

⁵⁴ For a fuller theoretical development of chaosmos and its implications for the dynamic movement between disorder and emergent order, see Soyoung Lee, “A Study on the Chaosmos Space Materializing a Multiple Potential World: Focusing on the Works of a Researcher” (D.F.A. diss., Kookmin University, 2014), 6–7, 21–22, 34, 43, 54, 62; Philip Kuberski, *Chaosmos: Literature, Science, and Theory* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), 48. For a broader biblical-theological application, see Seung Ho Bang, “Tyre That Brought Chaos: An Oracle Against Systematic Economic Injustice,” in *Tension in Resistance, Paradox in Freedom: Slavery Texts in the Bible and Their Readers*, eds. Soo J. Kim Sweeney and Stacy Davis, Resources for Biblical Study (Atlanta, GA: SBL, forthcoming).

In many ancient Near Eastern traditions, the struggle between order and chaos functions as a mythic grammar through which kingship itself is imagined. The king, often aligned with the divine sphere, embodies order and stability, while chaos is associated with disorder, rebellion, and boundary transgression, usually represented by uncontrollable waters and the sea.⁵⁵ Within this symbolic system, successful rulership is measured not merely by military strength but by the ability to transform instability into order.

Due to the significance of the struggle between order and chaos, the concept appears in various texts throughout the Near East. For instance, the creation account in Genesis 1 shows hints of Chaostkampf when God creates the world from confusion (תהו),⁵⁶ emptiness (בהו),⁵⁷ and darkness (חשך)⁵⁸ above the abyss (על-פני תהום) and over the face of the waters (על-פני המים).

Outside of the Hebrew Bible, one of the most famous examples of Chaostkampf is the Babylonian creation account, Enūma Eliš. Within the text, chaos was threatened through Tiāmat and the gods who joined her:

130.  ⁵⁹

131. 

132. 

Transliteration of the Cuneiform:

130. [ez-z]u kap-du sa-ki-pu mu-ša u im-ma

⁵⁵ Dennis J. McCarthy, “‘Creation’ Motifs in Ancient Hebrew Poetry.” *The Catholic Quarterly* 29, no. 3 (1967), 393–406.

⁵⁶ HALOT, 3137–38.

⁵⁷ HALOT, 550.

⁵⁸ HALOT, 1091.

⁵⁹ Cuneiform transcription from Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative (CDLI). “CDLI Literary 002718 (Enuma Elish) Composite Artifact Entry,” accessed December 28, 2025, <https://cdli.ucla.edu/P480701>.

Transliteration of the Cuneiform from W. G. Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 58. Translation of the Cuneiform provided by Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths*, 59.

131. [na]- šu-ú tam-ḥa-ri na-zar-bu-bu lab-bu

132. UKKIN-na šit-ku-nu-ma i-ban-nu-ú šu-la-a-ti

Translation of the Cuneiform:

130. Fiercely plotting, unresting by night and day,

131. Lusting for battle, raging, storming,

132. They set up a host to bring about conflict.

These lines depict the chaotic nature of Tiāmat's allies, describing them as "prepared for battle, furious, raging."⁶⁰ In response to Tiāmat and her followers' chaos, Marduk, the heroic chief god of Babylon, arms himself, defeats Tiāmat in combat, and splits her into two like a dried fish.⁶¹ Using her body, Marduk creates the world. Thus, out of the chaos of Tiāmat, Marduk was able to bring order and creation.

The Chaoskampf is not merely a mythic charter for royal power; it also encodes a gendered vision of authority. In many ancient Near Eastern texts, the capacity to subdue chaos—often depicted through female or feminized entities such as Tiāmat—is implicitly constructed as a masculine role. The victorious deity embodies order, control, rationality, and generative creation, while the forces of chaos are portrayed as unruly, boundary-breaking, and destabilizing. This cosmological pattern establishes a symbolic framework in which kings, as representatives of the divine realm, assume a masculinity defined by the ability to conquer, contain, and reorganize chaos. Thus, Chaoskampf narratives inform not only royal ideology but also the cultural expectations of what constituted legitimate, hegemonic masculinity in the ancient Near East.

While ancient texts do not articulate such concepts explicitly, the analogy helps clarify how these narratives imagine the movement from instability toward order. Against this conceptual background, Abimelech's rule takes on a distinctly ironic shape. Abimelech's kingship parodies Chaoskampf logic:

⁶⁰ *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary*, vol. N, pt 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 139.

⁶¹ Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths*, 95.

instead of defeating chaos, he generates it; instead of subduing disorder, he becomes its agent. The narrative repeatedly portrays him not as one who restrains violence or stabilizes the community, but as one whose actions multiply internal conflict, civil strife, and destruction. His rise to power, his reign, and his downfall all intensify disorder rather than resolve it, inverting the very logic that undergirds ancient ideals of royal masculinity.

However, Chaaskampf was not exclusive to mythical literature but was also prolific in the kingly ideals of the ancient Near East. Particularly, the Neo-Assyrian royal ideology emphasized this concept, with the king representing order.⁶² While the king and the capital symbolized order, the periphery and foreign lands embodied chaos. Thus, the duty of the king would be to conquer and expand their territory, not just for the sake of conquest, but also to bring order to the chaotic periphery.⁶³ However, Abimelech does not meet this standard, as he fails to bring order under his leadership. Under his rule, death and fighting are rampant in Israel. In fact, Abimelech is the source of this chaos as a usurper who attempts a coup by brutally slaughtering the seventy sons of Gideon. In addition, Abimelech stirs up further conflict by fighting against his own countrymen in battle, such as the ambush against Gaal and the sieges of Shechem and Thebez. Moreover, when God sent an evil spirit (רוח רעה), it creates chaos between Abimelech and Shechem, further associating Abimelech with disorder. In contrast, David is largely able to establish unity during his reign, especially after the chaotic period of the judges and Saul's tumultuous rule. By referring to the Near Eastern royal ideologies, it is possible that hegemonic men were expected to be capable of creating order out of chaos.

Across writings from multiple Near Eastern cultures, the ability to overcome turmoil and establish peace is something attributed to deities. This task of preserving order amidst the threat of chaos is entrusted to the monarch. While a king like David is able to approximate this goal through establishing a united monarchy, Abimelech completely fails in this regard. Rather than fighting to free Israel from enemy invaders like the judges (שפטים) before and after him, Abimelech instead takes power for his own selfish gain and begins

⁶² Mattias Karlsson. *Relations of Power in Early Neo-Assyrian State Ideology*, Studies in Ancient Near Eastern Records 10 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 125.

⁶³ Mario Liverani, "Imperialism," in *Archaeologists of the Middle East: Critical Perspectives*, eds. Susan Pollock and Reinhard Bernbeck, Blackwell Studies in Global Archaeology (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 232.

fighting fellow Israelites.⁶⁴ He is less like the masculine hero who brings order and more like the anti-hero who brings chaos instead.

7. Conclusion

Abimelech is ambitious, striving to prove that he can achieve the ideal masculinity through whatever means possible, in spite of his lowly status and origin. In fact, when the traits of ideal kingship and hegemonic masculinity are placed side by side, Abimelech emerges as a kind of parody-king—one who imitates the external forms of royal and masculine authority but consistently botches or reverses them. Each trait that defines the idealized Davidic model is echoed in Abimelech's story only in distorted or failed form: where David's strength establishes order, Abimelech's violence generates chaos; where David's speech persuades and unifies, Abimelech requires others to speak for him; where David's male companionship is marked by loyalty and mutual valor, Abimelech's associates are opportunistic and unreliable; and where David secures a legacy, Abimelech leaves none. The narrative thus presents Abimelech not merely as a deficient king but as a satirical inversion of royal and masculine ideals—a man who strives for hegemonic status only to expose the fragility and hollowness of his imitation.

Read within this Deuteronomistic horizon, Abimelech's story functions as a cautionary paradigm, illustrating how the pursuit of authority detached from order, legitimacy, and divine sanction destabilizes both masculinity and kingship. In a world where royal legitimacy is measured by the capacity to establish and preserve order, Abimelech's reign is remembered not for conquest but for collapse. His humiliating and feminized death seals the irony of the parody: the would-be hegemonic man attempts to perform kingship, yet the narrative preserves him as the example of how violent grasping at authority produces chaos rather than stability.

⁶⁴ Farber, "Struck Down by a Woman," 121–22.

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