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## CONTENTS

	Page
The Christian Pastor and Courtesy. R. R. Caemmerer .....	481
Sermon Study on Judges 9:8-15. Walter Roehrs .....	488
Luther's Negotiations with the Hussites. Jaroslav Pelikan, Jr. ....	496
Rhetoric in the New Testament: The Diction in Romans and Hebrews. Walter A. Jennrich .....	518
A Series of Sermon Studies for the New Church Year .....	532
Theological Observer .....	543

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Ein Prediger muss nicht allein weiden, also dass er die Schafe unterweise, wie sie rechte Christen sollen sein, sondern auch daneben den Wölfen wehren, dass sie die Schafe nicht angreifen und mit falscher Lehre verfuehren und Irrtum einfuehren.

Luther

Es ist kein Ding, das die Leute mehr bei der Kirche behaelt denn die gute Predigt. — *Apologie*, Art. 24

If the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle? — 1 Cor. 14:8

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ARCHIVES

# Sermon Study on Judges 9:8-15

## THE FABLE OF THE BRAMBLE KING

By WALTER R. ROEHRS

The word *fable* seems incongruous in the study of Bible teaching. Truth and fiction are incompatible categories. This needs to be said especially in our day when much in the Bible is labeled fiction or myth. However, like the parable, the fable is used by the Holy Spirit as a teaching device of truth.

It is not often that this literary genus is used by the sacred writers. Strictly speaking, there is only one more fable in Scripture besides the one under consideration here. It is very short and is found in 2 Kings 14:9.

The fable is similar to the parable in that it teaches by means of an illustration. It differs from the parable in that the latter selects an event from everyday life in its natural setting. The story of a parable could and did happen in the lives of the people who heard it: a farmer sowed seed; a housewife mixed dough; an owner of a vineyard hired laborers; etc. A fable is not true to nature; in its story inanimate creatures are presented as speaking and acting like human beings. In the Indian and Greek fable, animals assume the functions and play the role of human beings. The best known of these are, of course, those of Aesop. In the Old Testament fable it is not the animal, but the plant kingdom that is personified.

But because the fable is not based on a true life situation, we need not conclude that it cannot teach the truth. It is rather a very effective vehicle of instruction. Because it presents its point in an impersonal manner, it usually finds a more ready ear than if the truth were applied directly. Seeing an attitude in action makes it more vivid and graphic. Finally, since the maxim is presented without personal implication, it is readily translated into a general principle that applies at all times and under all similar circumstances.

### A PARAPHRASE

If you want to know what is right and how to order your life, *hearken unto me, ye freemen of Shechem*. If you accept my instruction and act accordingly, you will make it possible

that God may hearken unto you. I will make it clear by a fable about the trees.

The trees felt the need of having someone direct and control their affairs; so *the trees went forth to anoint a king over them*. They looked for a suitable candidate to whom they could entrust this prerogative. Their first choice fell upon a good tree. *They said unto the olive tree, Reign thou over us*.

The olive tree, however, realized that it was not intended to function in the capacity of a king. It was engaged in performing the purpose for which it was intended. Hence it said: *Should I stop my fatness, with which God and man are honored, and go to hold sway over the trees?*

When the olive tree refused their proposal, the trees made the same offer to another in their midst. *Then said the trees unto the fig tree: Come thou, and reign over us*. The fig tree was also a very useful member of the plant family, but it, too, resolved not to go beyond the sphere of its intended purpose. *But the fig tree said unto them: Should I stop my sweetness and my good fruit and go to hold sway over the trees?*

The trees were refused a third time when they approached another good member of their family. *Then said the trees unto the vine: Come thou, and reign over us*. The vine, too, wanted to continue to bear fruit and not engage in activity for which it was not intended. *And the vine said unto them: Should I stop my wine, which cheereth God and man, and go to hold sway over the trees?*

But the trees insisted, whether from perversity or from a natural feeling of need, on having a king from their own midst. It did not matter that their next choice was an utterly useless member of their family; they must have a king. *Then said all the trees to the bramble: Come thou, and reign over us*.

The bramble did not serve any good purpose in its own sphere as a plant, but it needed no coaxing to assume the role of a ruler over the other trees. It readily accepted the offer to be king. In that role it promised to do what it could not even do by natural capacity. *The bramble said unto the trees: If in truth ye anoint me king over you, then come and put your trust in my shadow*.

But the bramble also made it clear that as king it would demand complete submission under its sway. If it is king, the other trees had better do its bidding; *and if not, let fire come out of the bramble and devour the cedars of Lebanon*.

## HOMILETICAL SUGGESTIONS

This fable applied in the first place to the people and to the situation at the time it was spoken. Because it is deeply imbedded in a period of the history of Israel that is not so familiar, it will be necessary to sketch very briefly the period of the Judges and then the story of Gideon's judgeship (Judges 6-8). Although Gideon was God's chosen instrument to deliver Israel from the Midianites, he fell in his later days upon evil ways (chap. 8:24-27). However, he refused to be made king by the Israelites (chap. 8:22-23). After Gideon's death, Abimelech, a son of Gideon by a concubine, slew the seventy sons of Gideon and made himself king. However, the crime was not perfect. Jotham, one of the sons of Gideon and the speaker of this fable, escaped. The setting of the text must also include the sequel to the fable (chap. 9:16-57). Jotham's words came true: a fire went out from the bramble, Abimelech, in which not only the Shechemites were consumed, but also the thorn king himself.

To understand the point of the fable, it must also be remembered that during the period of the Judges the theocratic rule of God was still exercised directly. God Himself appointed the "heroes" or "saviors" who gave leadership and deliverance to His people. No provision had been made to elect a king to act as God's representative. When the Shechemites selected the worthless Abimelech as their king and murdered the sons of Gideon, they were not only showing ingratitude to the man who had delivered them from the Midianites (chap. 9:16-17), but thereby they were rising in revolt against the lordship of God.

But because the text is in the form of a parable or fable, it can be applied correctly and very effectively as a general principle. It poses the question for everyone: Whom have you chosen king in your life?

The insistence of the trees to have a king is duplicated in men generally. Consciously or unconsciously all men put themselves under the control and lordship of some governing principle which rules over their thinking and doing as a king over obedient subjects. Do men choose their king wisely?

There are many things which in their intended sphere serve a good purpose but were not designed to receive homage as life's dominating purpose. Several may be mentioned by

way of example. The pursuit of learning, whether in the area of science or in the fine arts, bears good fruit, but it is a perversion of their purpose to make them king. Its rule must result in misrule and failure.

Likewise wealth, leadership, etc. By means of the fable these good things warn us not to uproot them, but to leave them in their position of service to us with their intended fruit. Don't expect of them what they cannot promise: a satisfying life under their domination.

Still more pathetic are the people who become slaves of worthless kings: lust, crime, hedonism, etc. Sad to say, it is the natural inclination and choice of men's hearts to put themselves under such deceptive and cruel taskmasters. They promise the shadow of satisfaction and happiness. The sad irony of it is that the very opposite comes to pass. Fire comes out of the bramble to devour. It sears the consciences of men. It burns the lives of men, even of cedar height, and leaves only the ashes of remorse and the charred ruins of the habitations of happiness. Look about today to see what desolations of fear and restlessness and hopelessness this bramble king hath wrought.

And even when the good trees are exalted to rule and dominion, they turn out to be bramble kings. When material things are made to say: "Put your trust in my shadow, I will give you all you desire," it will be found that Mammon as a king in their lives is a bramble king. There is no shadow of peace and satisfaction for men in stone and metal, even though they be heaped mountain high. In their very nature these dead things cannot bring the shadow of rest to living men and living souls. Mammon is a tyrant who gives no rest. The parching, stinging rays of restlessness beat down unmercifully upon those who seek contentment under its branches. The thirst of having and getting burns ever more devastatingly as the sun of life's day mounts. Finally fires come out to devour. Likewise when science and invention are moved out of their sphere of service, they become brambles. Do not say to human ingenuity: "You are royal, you are mighty, you will solve all the ills of mankind." For every shadow of relief which it appears to bring, it creates new droughts of human needs. Very often fires come forth from its machines to devour men in ever greater holocausts of destruction. Men tremble today under the reign of the devices of this king.

And what king deserves our choice and allegiance?

Israel assembled at Shechem at the time of the Judges calls to mind another event in the history of this people. Its multitudes were gathered before the judgment place of Gabbatha. Before them stands a figure — a crowned figure, crowned with thorns. Another bramble king? “Behold your king,” says Pilate. Israel chooses: “Away with him! Crucify him!” He was nailed to the Cross. The Cross, however, becomes a throne; the crown of thorns becomes a crown of glory, of power unto hope and salvation for Israel and all men, of peace that blesses all who acclaim Him.

Behold your King and my King! Kneeling in penitent worship before Him, we put our trust in the shadow of His Cross, and there alone is shadow. The fiery rays of divine justice upon our sins are caught up in it and leave us untouched. The quieting shadow of peace and contentment is cast over every fear and tension. “I will give you rest.” Cf. Cant. 2:3; Is. 25:4 b; 32:1-2; 49:2; Ps. 17:8; 36:7; 63:7; 121:5.

Not only is there no danger of a bramble fire when we trust in His shadow, but in serving this King also all things which, when pursued for themselves, are brambles are turned into fruitful delights. Wealth, learning, ingenuity, leadership, all have a place in His kingdom. But when He is our King, all these are our servants and agents. They do not rule. They help us glorify Him and bring the blessings of His kingdom in ever greater measure to us and our fellow men. Stay in full allegiance to your King, and strike down every insurgent bramble!

The outline of the sermon will be as simple as the fable itself. Each section may be explained in its original local application and then in its wider significance as a general principle, or the fable may be taken as a whole in each of these meanings. The topic should revolve about the central thought: a thorn king or a thorn-crowned King.

#### EXEGETICAL NOTES

V. 7. Mount Gerizim towers some 900 feet over the valley in which Shechem lies. The human voice carries over such a distance under favorable circumstances. Some commentators believe that Jotham took his stand on a high protruding ledge of the mountain. “Modern travelers have remarked a project-

ing crag on the side of the mountain which forms a triangular platform overlooking the town in the valley, a natural pulpit suited to the requirements of the story" (Pulpit Commentary). The blessing was to be spoken from Mount Gerizim (Deut. 11:29). The present situation called for the curse of the Law upon the murderous renegades assembled below. From his lofty perch, like a distant conscience and an implacable nemesis, Jotham shot his winged words like so many barbed arrows of rebuke and retribution into the hearts of Abimelech and his cohorts. There is no lasting enjoyment or success of sin. "The voice of conscience comes from unexpected quarters," just when sin seems to have succeeded. Here is a verbal handwriting on the wall for sinful indulgence and a prophetic curse upon the triumph of evil. — The "men of Shechem" are addressed: *Baale*, lords, freemen. The term is often interchanged with "men" as a synonym (2 Sam. 2:4-5). Here it seems to have the added connotation of recalling to these "lords" that they had cravenly sold their birthright to a horrible slave driver. — The form of address reminds us of the words of the Prophets when they demanded a hearing from the people.

V. 8. "The trees went forth." The A. V. leaves the Infinitive Absolute construction untranslated. Likewise Luther. Very likely no special emphasis is intended. The Infinitive Absolute seems at times to be used "only as possessing a certain fullness of sound (hence for rhythmic reasons, like some uses of the separate pronoun)." (Gesenius-Kautzsch, 113, o, 1.) If there is any emphasis, it may denote the eagerness of the trees to have a king. — "Reign thou over us," literally, be king over us. The peculiar form of the imperative is repeated in v. 12, but is also found in 1 Sam. 28:2; Is. 32:11; Ps. 26:2.

V. 9. "Should I leave my fatness?"; Luther: "soll ich meine Fettigkeit lassen?" The verb *chadal* means to leave off, cease, desist. The form *hechodalti* (also vv. 11, 13) has an unusual vocalization in the Masoretic text. Some interpreters take it as a Hiphil. However, since the verb does not occur in the Hiphil or Hophal, it is perhaps best to assume that the first vowel of the stem has been influenced by the interrogative particle. It is in the perfect, "the perfectum confidentiae" to express a fact that is undoubtedly imminent. — "Wherewith by me they honor God and man" (A. V.). Luther: "die beide

Goetter und Menschen an mir preisen." I. C. C.: "With which gods and man are honored." The parallel in v. 13 favors making the verb impersonal (German: *man*) and construing the nouns as objects rather than as subjects. The preposition in the first person is merely the connective with the first person of the principal clause. LXX: ἐν ᾧ. If *elohim* is to be translated "gods," Jotham refers to the worship of idols into which Shechemites had lapsed at this time. Others take *elohim* in the sense of "leaders," "magistrates." The olive tree is prized by the aristocracy as well as the common man. However, olive oil was also used in the ceremonies honoring the true God (Lev. 2:1-6). Prophets, priests, and kings were anointed with oil at God's direction; the Messiah is the Anointed. For men in the Oriental world the olive was an indispensable household necessity. — "To be promoted over the trees"; Luther more literally: "dasz ich schwebe ueber die Baeume." The verb means in the first place to nod, to move to and fro; of the tremulous motion of anything suspended in the air, to wave, to sway; of trees moved by the wind, Is. 7:2. It is used in a metaphorical sense here: all the other trees will respond obediently to the nod and beck of the olive tree. It has the added connotation that the good trees refused to be lifted from their appointed and safe anchorage in the earth from which they drew the strength to fulfill their natural purpose, to assume the precarious position of ruling over the trees. Here they would be out of their element.

V. 13. "Which cheereth God and man." "The wine is said to cheer, or make rejoice, God because the drink offering consisted of wine (Num. 15:7, 10), and God was well pleased with the offerings of His people (Gen. 8:21; Phil. 4:18; Heb. 13:16)." — Pulpit Commentary. The Israelites also paid the tithe of the wine, Deut. 12:17. In later times wine was poured on the ground near the altar, Ecclus. 50, 15 (17), Fl. Josephus, *Antiquities* III, 9, 4, 234. Luther again: *Goetter*. — The refusal of the good trees to assume the role of leadership does not imply that good people today are to shrink from performing their civic duty. Such service belongs to the rightful sphere of men in a democracy.

V. 14. "The bramble" is the southern buckthorn, also known as Christ's thorn. It is a prickly shrub which bears no fruit, furnishes no lumber, does not even afford shade. Its



worthlessness gives the fable its ironic, almost sardonic, cutting edge. Perhaps this irony is also indicated in the form of the imperative: "Reign over us." In the case of each of the good trees an entreating, cohortative ending is used; here the straight imperative: the bramble needs no coaxing.

V. 15. "If in truth," A. V.; Luther: "recht und redlich." It means: in good faith, with integrity of purpose and sincerity of heart. The rule of the bramble from the very beginning is founded on suspicion. — "Put your trust in my shadow"; more literally: Flee to, or take refuge in, my shadow. Luther: "vertrauet euch meinem Schatten." This promise of the bramble makes the irony complete. What could be more ludicrously absurd than to think that the trees of the forest, including the stately cedar, should find refuge in the shadow of the lowly thornbush. The fact is that it affords no shadow at all. — "Let fire go out." This alternative in the pledge taken from the trees could be the only outcome of this transaction. The bramble is of no earthly good except as fuel for a destroying fire which spread to the orchard and forest (Ex. 22: 6; Is. 9: 18). Even the stateliest cedars would succumb to the fire proceeding from the lowly thornbush. Since the trees had not acted with integrity but foolishly and in bad faith, they can only expect this reward of their folly.

In vv. 16-20 Jotham, without any further interpretation of the fable, applies it directly to the unholy and wicked choice of Abimelech as king by the people of Shechem. The choice of the worst man in their midst was their folly. It was founded on bloodshed and treachery, and therefore it carried in it its own undoing. These verses may be included in the text if so desired.

