

TOLA THE JUDGE: A NEW MIDRASHIC ANALYSIS

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Two brief biblical verses describe the life and times of Tola, the seventh judge of Israel. *After Abimelech, Tola son of Puah son of Dodo, a man of Issachar, arose to deliver Israel. He lived at Shamir in the hill country of Ephraim. He led Israel for twenty-three years; then he died and was buried at Shamir* (Judg. 10:1-2).

After the tyrannical and maniacal three-year rule of Abimelech (approx. 1144-1141 BCE), there arose a legitimate Judge named Tola who saved Israel¹ and ruled for 23 years (approx. 1141-1118 BCE). The Bible devotes merely two short verses to this twenty-three year reign in contradistinction to Abimelech's three-year reign of terror, which is allotted one entire chapter consisting of 57 verses (Judges 9). Biblical brevity typically conveys epochal serenity lacking any *Sturm und Drang* worthy of verbose elaboration. The Talmud and midrashic literature also fail to elaborate the life and character of Tola.

However, the clues to Tola's life are embedded in the meaning and symbolism of some names mentioned in these verses. The naming of a person in the biblical era had the aura of special significance. For example, the letter *hé* added to the names of Abram and Sarai raised the carriers of the new names to a higher level of spirituality. The frustration and hopes of the matriarch Leah find expression in the names of her sons. Gideon's courageous act of destroying the symbol of Baal earned him the name Jerubb^hbaal.

This article offers a hypothetical reconstruction of Tola's judgeship by analyzing the meanings of the names associated with him and by juxtaposing them alongside the multiple biblical references and prophecies that refer to his tribal patriarch Issachar. By weaving all these textual references together, a picture of Tola's character and essence begins to emerge, illuminating the probable thrust of his reign. This approach is based on the idea of *midreshei shemot*, "interpretations of a homiletic nature applied to the names of people and places on the basis of sound or semantic potential".²

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GENEALOGY OF TOLA

Tola's genealogy is reported as *Tola son of Puah . . . He lived at Shamir*. Each of these names mirrors the name of one of Issachar's sons: *Tola, Puvah* (PUVH), *Iob*, and *Shimron* (Gen. 46:13). Tola's name and that of his father are virtually identical with the names of of Issachar's first two sons. The name of Tola's city, Shamir (SMYR), is similar to Issachar's fourth son's name, Shimron (SMRN).³ It would seem that these similarities are noted in the text in order to make a strong connection between Tola and Issachar. By associating him with classical Issachar names, Tola is portrayed as the embodiment of the blessings given to Issachar. This is further seen in the verse describing him not simply as a descendant of Issachar, but as *a man of Issachar*.⁴

A MAN OF ISSACHAR

According to Jacob's deathbed blessing/prophecy, *Issachar is a strong-boned ass, crouching among the sheepfolds. When he saw how good was security [menuhah], and how pleasant was the country, he bent his shoulder to the burden, and became a toiling serf* (Gen. 49:14-15). Geographically, in ancient Israel, the territory of the tribe of Issachar was sandwiched between the east and west territories of the tribe of Manasseh on either side of the Jordan. Thus Tola and his tribe, Issachar, were situated between two territories which contain *sheepfolds*, enclosures for sheep, as the Bible reports that the tribe of Manasseh had many sheep. The tribes of Reuben, Gad, and half of Manasseh originally wished to settle east of the Jordan to take advantage of the grazing fields: *They stepped up to him [Moses] and said, 'We will build here sheepfolds for our flocks and towns for our children'* (Num. 32:16). Thus the meaning of Jacob's blessing, *crouching among the sheepfolds*, may refer to the tribal territorial distribution and proximity of Issachar to both borders of east and west Manasseh.

Beyond this geographical idea, the blessing of Issachar gives a feeling of domestic calm. The domestication of the ass and sheep and the utilitarian production of wool all imply an atmosphere of serenity; of commerce rather than combat. This would add to the idea of tranquillity implied in the very brevity of the verses describing Tola's judgeship.

The other theme in the blessing of Issachar is the idea of willingness to perform hard work: *he bent his shoulder to the burden, and became a toiling serf*. Regarding Tola, this may imply that he worked very hard as a leader and saw himself as a servant of the people, instead of demanding that the people serve him. This characterization of Tola is found in the commentary of Malbim to Judges 10:1. He notes that the text contrasts Tola with Abimelech; for Abimelech sought to lord it over the Israelites as his subjects, whereas Tola sought to help them and take care of their needs.

Moses gave Issachar the blessing/prophecy: *And of Zebulun he said: Re-joice, O Zebulun, on your journeys, and Issachar, in your tents* (Deut. 33:18). Here, again, the theme of domestic bliss is associated with Issachar, enjoying life in his tent. Beyond this, the words *in your tents* [be-ohalekha] are understood by the Sages to convey intellectuality by referring to the tents under which the Torah is studied (TB *Berakhot* 63b; *Genesis Rabbah* 63:15). This concept was first introduced in Genesis, where Jacob is described as *a mild man who stayed in tents* [yoshev ohalim], as opposed to Esau who is called *a skillful hunter, a man of the outdoors* (Gen. 25:27, Rashi).

Issachar and Zebulun are a commonly referenced set of paired biblical brothers. Unlike most brothers who receive special notice in the Bible and become rivals or even adversaries, Issachar and Zebulun chose to work together, combining their separate and different skills to their mutual advantage. According to the Midrash, it was Zebulun who, as a merchant, went to sea in order to give both tribes financial support, whereas Issachar remained at home (in his tent) studying Torah in order to give both tribes spiritual and intellectual uplift (TB *Megillah* 6a; *Numbers Rabbah* 13:17). Issachar's erudition and scholarly judgment are noted in Chronicles: *Of the Issacharites, men who knew how to interpret the signs of the times, to determine how Israel should act* (I Chron. 12:33).

As a judge, symbolizing the tribe of Issachar, Tola would thus have embodied the qualities of scholarship and learning that minimized any internal civil strife and which, through mediation, averted any potential external strife. This is yet another reflection of Jacob's prophetic words: *he saw how good was security* [menu^hah], *and how pleasant was the country*.

While the similarity of names found among the children of Issachar and the family of Tola may be attributed to the fact that certain names recurred through the generations within a particular tribe,⁵ the Midrash finds a deep meaning in the names Tola and Puah.

Midrash ha-Gadol explains that the name of Tola, son of Issachar, is associated with *tola'at* (worm). Just as a worm "only has its mouth" and no limbs, so do members of the tribe of Issachar rely only on the wisdom of their mouths, their Torah scholarship.⁶ A similar idea is found in *Midrash Sekhel Tov*.⁷ This can be applied to Tola the judge as well, thus characterizing him as a scholarly figure.

The names of Tola's ancestors also have positive connotations. "Puah", spelled differently (with an *ayin*) but having the same pronunciation, was the name of the midwife who, along with Shiphrah, disobeyed Pharaoh and refused to kill the Israelite male children (Ex. 1:15). While the root is understood to mean "scream" (as in Isaiah 42:14), the rabbinic interpretation of the name Puah is "one who uses gentle words and tones to soothe a crying baby" (TB *Sotah* 11b). The notion of calm and tranquillity is again hinted at in the text.

Midrash ha-Gadol associates the name Puah with that of a plant (madder) used to make dyes: "Just as *puah* colors everything, so does the tribe of Issachar cover the world with Torah".⁸ Similarly, *Midrash Sekhel Tov* explains that "Puah" alludes to the word *peh* (mouth), "the wide-open mouth" that teaches Jewish law.⁹

Dodo, the name of Tola's grandfather, is similar in spelling to the name David, and means *beloved* (as often found in Song of Songs, e.g., 5:6, 6:3, 7:11). Here again we have a very positive connotation, implying happiness and mutual love.

SHAMIR

The name of Tola's dwelling place, Shamir, means "hard stone", e.g., flint or diamond (Ezek. 3:9). In the Talmud, *shamir* signifies a mythical worm that was powerful enough to cut through stone and was therefore used by King Solomon to build the First Temple in Jerusalem; it obviated the need for cutting tools that symbolized war instead of peace (*Tosefta Sotah*, 15:1; TB *Sotah* 48b; TJ *Sotah* 24b; TB *Gittin* 68a-b; Rashi, *Pesahim* 54a; Maimonides,

Commentary on *Avot* 5:6). Along with Tola, Shamir is the second term associated with this judge that means "worm." From this interpretation of Shamir we may deduce that Tola was a judge who pursued peace, like the mythical worm that could cut stone without sharp blades.

Thus, from the various data and associations concerning the genealogy of Tola in the very brief description provided by the Tanakh, we may surmise that Tola's 23 years of leadership constituted a somewhat idyllic period during which scholarship flourished, domestic bliss reigned, and peace blossomed.

NOTES

1. Although the Bible does not explicitly state which enemy Tola saved the Israelites from, it may refer to the remnants of the despotic regime of Abimelech, or to the Baal worshippers mentioned in Judges 8:33. See Zvi Binyamin Wolf, *Sefer Shofetim* (Bnei Brak, Israel: 1995) p. 110.
2. Moshe Garsiel, *Biblical Names: A Literary Study of Midrashic Derivations and Puns* (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1991) p. 19.
3. It may even be that the place Shamir was named after Shimron. See Avraham Taub, *Divrei Tovah – Judges 10-16* (Bnei Brak: 2000) p. 16.
4. A. Taub, op. cit., p. 16.
5. Z. B. Wolf, op. cit., p. 110.
6. Quoted in Menahem Kasher, *Torah Shelemah* (Jerusalem: Torah Shelemah Institute, 1992), vol. 7, p. 1681, note 72.
7. *Midrash Sekhel Tov*, Buber edition, p. 290.
8. Quoted in M. Kasher, op. cit., vol. 7, p. 1681, note 74.
9. *Midrash Sekhel Tov*, loc. cit.



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