

TOLA; THE FAITHFUL, SILENT TYPE

The world has seen many war lords over the years. Genghis Khan, Idi Amin, Mohamed Farah Aidid, and those are just a few. During the period of the judges there arose a warlord by the name of Abimelech that came along after the death of Gideon. He led his violent and blood thirsty wrath for three years before finally meeting his demise thanks to the combination of an upper millstone and the working end of a sword. He was just one example of why God's people do not need a political leader. You see, regardless of the names on a ballot or the name of a person in charge of a nation, when man's heart seeks darkness over light, his destiny will be nothing more than misery and turmoil. So, for three years the people of Israel lived under the tyranny of Abimelech who slayed the sons of Gideon and seized power. In the end, the people of Israel once again called out to the name of the Lord who delivered them from Israel and raised up a man from a tiny tribe to judge them and keep them in check. Tola was his name.

Raised in the land of Issachar, a small land that had been allocated to the tribe of Issachar at the behest of Joshua, it was known as a land of conversion dominated by religious scholars. 1 Chronicles lists the men of Issachar, some 87,000 of them, as mighty men of valor with an understanding of the times, knowing what Israel had to do. It is my understanding that Tola is the only judge from this tribe (Deborah may have been) and he is listed as the son of Puah and the son (grandson) of Dodo, which is a derivative of the name David which means "beloved". He did not, however, reside in Issachar. We are told that he arose to save Israel and dwelt in Shamir, in the mountainous region of Ephraim for 23 years until his death.

I am drawn to the words that are used in the beginning of the passage, "there arose to save Israel". I believe this to mean that he arose from a divine calling from the Lord. He did not place himself into this position. Upon the death of Abimelech, the people of Israel departed for their own lands and likely took time to reflect upon their misgivings. So, if we follow the cycle that the Jewish people had followed, that would lead to a time of repentance and redemption. Upon the recognition of their wrongdoings God would raise up a judge to keep them in line until they ultimately rejected the judge and followed their lusts and desires at which time God would see fit to hand their hearts over to said lusts and desires. This is the time that Israel would recognize their faults and cry out to the Lord at which time he sees fit to raise up yet another unassuming judge from the tiny tribe tucked between the two Manasseh's. He arose to "save" Israel, not lead Israel. He was not there to assume the role of a political leader and he was comfortable with this. He was risen up to hold Israel accountable for their transgressions and see to it that God remained at the forefront of their minds.

This may explain why he made his way south, residing in the land of Ephraim, in the village of Shamir. Shamir, not to be confused with Samaria, was located in the center of Israel, and so the central location meant that he was equally accessible to all of God's people. Shamir

was likely located approximately eight miles to the north of present-day Samaria, just to the west of Tirzah. This area, much like the judge himself, was an unassuming area that had little significance from a historical standpoint.

What is fascinating about Tola is that so little is said about him, yet he kept Israel in check for 23 years. He did not stage revolts, he did not encourage expansion of land or the overtaking of nations. He merely stayed faithful to God and did what he was told. I picture a man who woke up each day, bowed his head in prayer, spent a day being productive (possibly tending to sheep, sewing garments or tents, or helping his neighbors with whatever they may need in exchange for sustenance). All the while, he was listening for God's word and passing it along to anyone who cared enough to listen. Because he shared this wonderful connection with the Lord, people from all over the land would seek him out for sage advice and his testimony while taking it back to their own territories and sharing what they had been given. Because of this, the people who would hear about this man from second-hand sources would seek him out to see and hear for themselves. The domino effect of testimony from one source to the next, originating from this simple man in the mountains of Ephraim led to peace and a simple, God-centered life for the Jewish people for 23 years.

What can we learn from this simple and quiet man? Maybe that we don't need theatrics to pass along the Good News. I enjoy a powerful sermon, good music and singing and praise, however I suppose keeping it simple did great things for the nation of Israel. Their aspirations were limited to glorifying the Lord and living a quiet life free from action and drama. It kept them out of trouble and it kept them close to the Lord. When Christ came along, the people were anticipating a strong military or government leader that would free them from the struggles of the world. However, what we got was a quiet, humble servant that asked us to follow Him and His example. Much like Tola, who was quiet and humble, a man that sought to please the Lord and nothing else. Apparently, it was contagious because it kept the nation of Israel close to God's heart for quite some time.