

"Peshat Isn't So Simple"-- a Book Review

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Review by Israel Drazin

Peshat Isn't so Simple

By Rabbi Hayyim Angel

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For over two millennia most Jewish Bible commentators did not explain the Bible's plain meaning, called "peshat" in Hebrew, but used the biblical verses and events as sources for homiletical lessons. Some exceptions existed, such as the writings of Maimonides, Abraham ibn Ezra, and Rashbam. Unfortunately many people thought that what rabbis told them in sermons was what the Bible actually states. They believed imaginative stories, such as Abraham destroying his father's idols, are events told in the Torah.

Today, there are some yeshivot that are teaching peshat and new books are appearing with peshat. Hayyim Angel, a clear-thinker and author of six splendid books and over a hundred learned articles, all written in interesting and easy language, is in the forefront of such scholars. People who want to know what the Torah actually says – distinguishing "between text and interpretation" - will learn much from his writings. (All the quotes in this review are from Rabbi Angel's book.)

Rabbi Angel devotes eleven of his twenty-one chapters to discussing the methods of peshat, and offers many eye-opening fascinating examples in ten chapters. He states that the best peshat “captures the language or the spirit of a passage more fully.” This is not easy. Also, although there are many rabbis and scholars who seek the peshat today, they do not always agree how it should be done or what the peshat is.

Understanding the simple meaning of the biblical text is influenced by the commentator’s worldview. Rabbi Angel mentions Maimonides who “maintained that if logic or scientific knowledge contradicts the literal sense of the biblical text, that text must not be taken literally,” but understood figuratively or allegorically. Maimonides understood “that nature will not be altered fundamentally in the messianic era” and interpreted messianic prophecies such as Isaiah’s view that at that time “the wolf shall dwell with the lamb” as a poetic description indicating that all nations will live together in peace. Maimonides felt that humans are unable to see angels while in a waking state and therefore interpreted Abraham’s meeting with three angels as a vision. He felt that the prophet Hosea “did not actually marry a prostitute, nor did Isaiah walk around naked in public,” nor did Ezekiel “lie on his sides for a total of 430 days” even though the text states that they did. These and many other events, according to Maimonides, should be understood as the prophets’ visions, parables, or allegories.

“Although the divinely revealed Torah is an eternal covenant (Maimonides believed that) it was given to a certain society at a particular time.” Maimonides “attempted to understand how the ancient setting in which the Torah was given influenced the narrative and style of the Torah, and even the mitzvot (the divine commands).” While

God had no need of sacrifices, for example, since “the Israelites had a strong predilection to offer animal sacrifices,” God allowed the practice. The Torah contains many passages concerning sacrifices and Maimonides taught that these passages should be understood as showing that God “prescribed specific boundaries for this form of worship by insisting that animals could be sacrificed only in authorized shrines” and only certain animals could be used, and then only in a restricted manner.

While Maimonides interpreted the Torah with rationalistic eyes, Nachmanides saw the Torah through mystic lenses. Nachmanides attacked Maimonides: “Behold, these words (about sacrifices) are worthless; they make a great breach, raise big question, and pollute the table of God.” Nachmanides maintained that sacrifices

“were the ideal means of communing with God, and not concessions to the ancient Israelites’ historical condition.”

Rabbi Angel describes seekers for peshat who drew the meaning of words and events from a wide variety of sources and were able to explain biblical events based upon what other cultures and nations were doing at the time. Maimonides “believed that were we to have access to more documents from the ancient world, we would be able to determine the reasons behind all of the commandments” (Angel’s emphasis). But others, such as Nehama Leibowitz “avoided ancient Near Eastern sources.”

Rabbi Angel describes the interpretation methodologies of many other famous commentators, such as Saadiah Gaon, Rashi, Abraham ibn Ezra, Abarbanel, and Obadiah Sforno, as well as modern thinkers such as Binyamin Lau, Yoel Bin-Nun, Moshe Shamah, Leon Kass, and many others. He lists a host of these thinkers in his appendix together with their dates and home country.

Many of these peshat interpretations that Rabbi Angel tells us are fascinating and enlightening; others are thought-provoking but unreasonable to modern thinkers. For example Moshe Shamah points out that “Esau in the Bible was nothing like (the derogatory way) he is portrayed in (midrashic) sources.” Abarbanel notes that God instructed Moses to have his brother Aaron perform the first three of the ten plagues because God knew that the Egyptian magicians would duplicate these three plagues and God did not want to embarrass Moses; once the magicians conceded defeat during the plague of lice, God transferred the actions to Moses. Rabbi Shamah “understands the narratives of the Creation, Eden, Cain and Abel. Abraham’s encounters with the angels in Genesis 18, and Balaam’s talking donkey as allegories or parables.” Rabbis Shamah and Sassoon understood the Bible’s large tribal counts as being symbolic. Yehuda Kiel argues that the story of the tower of Babel “need not refer to the people literally to all humanity; it may refer simply to the people living in the region.” Leon Kass suggested that Abraham was arguing that the city of Sodom be spared in Genesis 18 because of objective justice and because he cared for his nephew Lot. While he was concerned for Lot, he made his plea in general terms and stopped at ten because if he “reduced the argument to (will you save the city for) one (person) it would have been too obvious that he was asking God to save Lot.”

In contrast, Sforno argued that the Israelite worship of the golden calf “permanently damaged Israel’s ideal spiritual level. “As a consequence of this sin, later prophets did not prophesy in the waking state attained by Moses. This comment is difficult to support from the text.” It is also contrary to current

thinking that descendants are not punished for their forbearer's misdeeds. Additionally, there were commentators who were willing to criticize the patriarchs for their behavior. Nachmanides, for instance, wrote that Abraham committed a great sin when he tried to save his life by saying that his wife Sarah was his sister. Rabbi Elhanan Samet insisted that Jacob's decision to remain with his father-in-law Laban for a half dozen years to earn a living rather than returning home to Canaan to do so was a terrible mistake; it "aroused the jealousy of Laban's family, and led him (Jacob) to unwittingly curse (his wife) Rachel."

Rabbi Angel includes entire chapters discussing the Tower of Babel; Sarah's treatment of Abraham's concubine Hagar; Joseph's bones; comparing the judge Gideon to the patriarch Abraham; mixing love and politics as seen in the relationships of David with King Saul, his son Jonathan, and his wife Michal; Ezekiel's prophecy about the war of Gog; and the tale of Solomon determining true justice for child custody with his shocking ruse in suggesting to cut the baby in half. Readers will be surprised, delighted, and enlightened by the information in these chapters.

In summary, this book contains a wealth of intriguing ideas, what the Bible is actually saying rather than imaginary sermons built out of biblical words.