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Vision from the Prophet and Counsel from the Elders

By Rabbi Hayyim Angel

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Reviewed by Rabbi Israel Drazin

This scholarly, very readable, and informative book by a teacher of rabbinical students and advanced undergraduates at Yeshiva University is a superb book for anyone of any religion who wants to learn what the Bible is actually saying. Rabbi Angel examines the nineteen books of the Hebrew Bible that follow the five books of Moses, from Joshua through Chronicles, the prophets and writings. He exposes the plain meaning of the texts, not the homiletical, sermonic, lessons that others draw from them. He also offers some guidelines how to read the plain meaning of Scripture. Readers will discover that many of the books do not say what they think they say and will be enjoyably surprised to learn what they are saying.

For example: Angel explains why Joshua was a perfect candidate to succeed Moses. Both the books of Joshua and Judges report incidences out of chronological order, and the second century CE Rabbi Ishmael said that the five books of Moses also sometimes do so. Many of the biblical heroes had sons who did not follow their ways, even turning to idols. Some Bible commentators understood biblical statements literally that others insisted are allegories; thus Nachmanides believed Isaiah's prophecy about a wolf and lamb lying together (11:6-9), that animals would become non-carnivorous in the messianic age. Similarly, while many people understood biblical prophecies as predictions of what will occur,

others, such as Tosaphot Yevamot 50a, s.v. teda, and Malbim on Isaiah 11, took the prophecies as predictions of what should happen. In fact, they note that many famous prophecies never occurred.

Rabbi Angel reveals that frequently we need to read biblical narratives both forward and backward. For example: "When one reads the narrative from beginning to end, it appears that (King) Solomon failed spiritually only toward the end of his life.... Once we know the tragic end of Solomon, however, it is possible to look back through the narrative and trace the roots of Solomon's failure to the beginning of his reign." Angel also uses this reading-back technique to understand other biblical figures. He shows that Bible readers need to pay close attention to the text. Thus, he discloses that some biblical stories, such as Ruth "initially appear clear (but) are more elusive after further scrutiny." This scrutiny, which many fail to make, but which Angel does, reveals that the "short narrative (of Ruth) captures so many subtleties in so short a space." Sometimes commentators are able to see problems and need to argue poetic flexibility in their interpretations: Many rabbis explain Psalm 37:25's "I have been young and am now old, but I have never seen a righteous man abandoned, or his children seeking bread" as "never totally abandoned."

Readers will find surprising facts in this splendid book. Some examples are: Our current breakdown of biblical books is different than they were in the past. The books of Kings, Chronicles, and Ezra-Nehemiah were not divided into two books. Conversely, Psalms 1 and 2 were originally considered by several sages to be one psalm. The order of the Hebrew alphabet was not yet fixed during the ancient biblical period. Some rabbis suggest that some of the Proverbs in chapters 30-31 were composed by non-Jews. Remarkably, the Greek version of Esther, the Septuagint, mentions God's name over fifty times, but the Hebrew version doesn't refer to God even once. Additionally, it is possible to read, and Rabbi Angel shows how, that the main character of the book Esther is King Ahasuerus.

Among many other thought-provoking revelations, Angel notes the non-prophetic perspective of the book Ecclesiastes and writes: "Significantly, Ecclesiastes' inclusion in Tanakh (the Hebrew Bible) and its consideration as a divinely inspired book elevates human perception into the realm of the sacred, joining revelation and received wisdom as aspects of religious truth."

These are just a very small fraction of the multiple insights that Rabbi Hayyim Angel divulges in this splendid book.