
Review of Ronald Benun's New Volume on Psalms

Byline:

Rabbi Hayyim Angel

Book Review

Ronald Benun, *Psalms and the Prophetic Message of Jeremiah*, vol. 1 (Tebah: 2021), 368 pages.

Reviewed by Rabbi Hayyim Angel

After many decades of research, Ronald Benun has published the first volume of his life's work on the Book of Psalms. Benun follows in the footsteps of his revered mentor, Rabbi Solomon David Sassoon.

This work is original and creative, as Benun identifies a plethora of proposed allusions between selected psalms and the entire Bible, most notably the Book of Jeremiah.

Benun's thought-provoking analysis combines careful attention to minor details within a psalm, as well as the interlocking nexus of the entire Tanakh ("intertextuality"). In the 1980s, Benun developed then cutting-edge software to improve his ability to compare multiple biblical passages at once. He presents the results of his research in his book.

Benun also submits explanations of the sequencing of the psalms: "Psalms is not simply an anthology of unrelated poems. Rather, it also has the characteristics of a book, with an overall message, and sequence from chapter to chapter and from unit to unit" (306). Ibn Ezra (on Psalm 3:1) rejected this approach out of hand, but other great commentators, such as Rabbi Saadiah Gaon, pursued this line of inquiry.

The volume is best suited to scholars and other highly educated laypeople with strong backgrounds in Jewish Studies.

The sheer quantity of potential parallels Benun adduces is breathtaking. Each reader likely will reach different conclusions as to which to accept as compelling and which to consider more tenuous. Even once a set of parallels is established, individuals also may disagree over how to interpret the significance of those parallels. As the adage goes, one person's *peshat* is another person's *derash*.

Following the path of the best of Jewish scholarly tradition, Benun encourages his readers to evaluate his arguments based on the evidence. He painstakingly presents his arguments with careful documentation, rigor, and clarity.

Another compelling methodological contribution is Rabbi Solomon Sassoon's "bumps in the road" interpretive stance. Many academic scholars have a tendency to smooth out difficulties, often by mechanically proposing text emendations. Benun retorts that more thoughtful attention to these anomalies may serve to unlock the intent of the biblical authors. For example, by deviating from an alphabetical acrostic or another pattern, an author may deliberately convey a shift in idea and mood. Emending a text to "correct" the anomaly, by contrast, is not only facile and tenuous, but may well obscure precisely the point the biblical author wishes to express through the use of that variance!

On a personal note, I also am coming out with a book on Psalms this year (Hayyim Angel, *Psalms: A Companion Volume* (New York: Kodesh Press, forthcoming). I found it particularly enlightening to read an entirely different approach to the psalms. There are endless facets to the prophetic works of the Bible, and we are blessed to have high-quality scholarship like that of Ronald Benun now in the mixture of ideas and approaches to the ever-inspiring and elevating words of the Psalms.

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