
Creating Space Between Peshat and Derash: A Book Review

Creating Space between Peshat and Derash

A Collection of Studies on Tanakh

By Hayyim J. Angel

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This very informative, easy to read book contains twenty essays that introduce readers to the truth about quite a few biblical matters, as well as many facts about Jewish history and famous Bible commentators. Rabbi Hayyim Angel, the author, is a Bible professor at Yeshiva University, the rabbi of the prestigious New York Spanish-Portuguese Synagogue, and the author of three books and over seventy very good articles. He has the ability to raise interesting questions and answer them with fascinating, informative, and thought-provoking information. The word “peshat” in his title means the plain meaning of the biblical text, while “derash” denotes the various sermonic meanings that rabbis derived from the text, frequently to teach moral lessons or highlight rabbinic laws, even if they are not the plain sense of the text. The essays address peshat and derash, along with other subjects.

His first essay, for example, gives a wealth of information about the famous Bible commentator Don Isaac Abarbanel (1437-1508). Some scholars disparage Abarbanel’s work – “On the whole, [Abarbanel’s] commentaries are not of the highest caliber.” Others extol his writings – “both in his methods and in the nature of his commentary [Abarbanel] stands alone and without equal.” Angel explains what prompted the disagreement. He tells Abarbanel’s view on whether the Torah commands Jews to have a monarchy, and why he, who had served as a highly respected court official in a monarchy, opposed this political concept. Angel also divulges Abarbanel’s views on the coming of the messiah after he experienced expulsion from Spain with the rest of the Jews in 1492, and his understanding of prophecy, especially why the Talmud has a different order of the books of the prophets than the currently-used sequence in Jewish Bibles. Angel also addresses the critique of some critics that Abarbanel does not offer original commentaries and Abarbanel’s view on whether biblical figures such as King David did wrong. As a result of his analysis of these and other issues in this essay, readers not only obtain a good insight into the mind of Abarbanel, but the views of other Bible commentators who opposed him and interpreted the Bible differently, and much other information.

In his second essay, as another example, Angel examines the controversial subject of Jews being a chosen people: do all Jews agree on an answer to this question; are non-Jews also chosen; if the Jews were chosen, what were they chosen for; is there a reciprocal agreement requiring something from the Jews; is chosenness guaranteed forever; is it biological; is it a religious or a moral issue; and more. This example shows how Rabbi Angel is capable of exploring a host of issues in depth in a single essay.

Angel also analyzes the legends about Hur, who is mentioned in the Bible for joining Joshua in helping hold up Moses’ hands while the Israelites fought against the people of Amalek who attacked the Israelites marching in the rear, and Pharaoh’s daughter who drew the infant Moses from the sea and named him. He explores why God forbade Moses from entering Canaan with the people he was leading. Did Moses really do something wrong? And, if so, what was it? Is it reasonable to think that he was punished, as some say, because he hit a rock instead of speaking to it? Drawing water from a rock by speaking or hitting are both unnatural. Does this episode

illustrate the principle that even the greatest human being is not perfect?

In another essay, he notes that Maimonides (1138-1204) and other traditional interpreters taught that people are permitted to interpret Scripture as they think proper as long as they do not deviate in their behavior from the rules established in the *Halakhah*, the law. In still another he explores the life of the biblical Ruth as described in the book named after her. He shows how many of the episodes are purposely presented in an ambiguous manner, and he explains how the ambiguity helps readers gain more from the tale.

In summary, these examples show the high caliber of Rabbi Hayyim Angel's contribution, its depth, wide scope, and interesting questions and ideas.

Byline:

Dr. Israel Drazin is the author of seventeen books, including a series of five volumes on the Aramaic translation of the Hebrew Bible, which he co-authors with Dr. Stanley M. Wagner, and a series of four books on the twelfth century philosopher Moses Maimonides. The Orthodox Union (OU) and Yeshiva University publish weekly chapters of Drazin and Wagner's book *Let's Study Onkelos* on www.ou.org/torah and on [www.yutorah@yutorah.org](mailto:yutorah@yutorah.org). His website is www.booksnthoughts.com.