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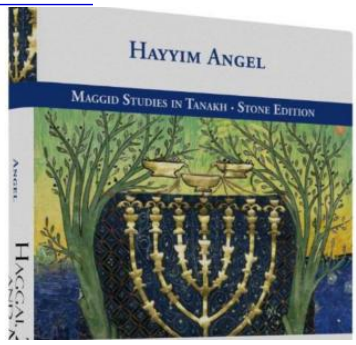

Hayyim Angel
Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi
Prophecy in an Age of Uncertainty

Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi: Prophecy in an Age of Uncertainty, By Hayyim Angel, Maggid Books, 2016.

Reviewed by Rabbi Dr. Israel Drazin

Very few people know much about the three final prophets Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. They do not know when they lived, what they said, what kind of contribution they made to the Jewish people, if their impact is still felt today, did they work together, what was their relationship to Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Mordechai, and Daniel, did they work with any of these people, when did these latter people live? Many know that the three prophets functioned during the second temple period, but do not know exactly when. Was it around 516 BCE when the second temple was built or a century or two later. Some people know the tradition that they were the last of the prophets even though the Bible itself does not say this, but what was prophecy, why did it end, what impact did the end of prophecy have upon Judaism when it stopped, and what is the end of prophecy's impact today? Did these three prophets or any of the three prophesy that a messiah would come? What did they say about the future, and did they say what they said clearly? What was the role of the Torah in the second temple period?

Rabbi Hayyim Angel answers these and many more questions in his very informative, easy to read, relatively short, but to the point book. Rabbi Angel is a highly respected teacher, lecturer, and author. I have read many of his articles and books and enjoyed everything he has written. I have quoted him often in my own books and people told me they liked his ideas, his insights, and the way he presented them. I think that everyone will have this reaction to this book.

Rabbi Angel had a difficult task before him as he wrote this book because certain sections of Zechariah are nearly impossible to decipher. Rashi, ibn Ezra, and Radak preface their commentaries by stating how challenging it is to understand what the prophet is saying. Even parts of the other prophets' words are unclear.

But, as I wrote, Angel fulfills his task, and does so with verve. He integrates traditional and contemporary scholarship. He tells us that to better understand the three prophets, we need to understand what occurred to Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Mordecai, and Daniel, and especially the general history of the time.

He writes: “Many of the issues the prophets dealt with are also strikingly relevant in the modern period.” We read that many Jews chose to remain in the diaspora after being expelled from Israel when the temple and the country was destroyed in 586 BCE. They did not return to Zion in 538 BCE when the Persian king allowed the return. Only 42,360 people came home. “In the medieval system of chapter breaks in our printed Tanakhs, there are 929 chapters. Of these, 129 – or roughly one eighth – are comprised of Second Temple books.” The books of Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi have only nineteen chapters. This is one reason why we need a scholar such as Rabbi Angel to explain what is happening during this period.

This was a time when Israel was impoverished, the rebuilt temple was small and far from lavish, the ark was missing, Jews had understood that a messianic redemption would return. They read this promise into past prophecies. But what they saw and felt was far from what they expected. Judea, as the land was called at this time, was only a tiny vassal state in the vast, powerful, and pagan Persian Empire. Tosaphot Yevamot 50a and Malbim explain the failure of the prophecies to be fulfilled: “Prophecy predicts what *should* happen, but not necessarily what *will* happen.”

Hagai focused his prophecy on encouraging his nation to build a temple despite the existing problems. Zechariah, speaking to the people when they resumed building the temple, consoles his disillusioned co-religionists and calls upon them to act properly and cease behaving as their ancestors. He addressed a broad range of issues pertaining to the new harsh political reality with eight difficult to understand visions. He answered questions such as, since we returned to Israel, should we continue the fasts we instituted to remember the destruction of Israel and its temple; and is God continuing to reject us because of our bad behavior?

The traditional view contained in commentaries such as Radak and Abarbanel, which is not clearly in the Bible, is that Malachi was the last of the prophets. There is also no biblical statement that prophecy no longer exists. Angel writes, “it is likely that he was [the last prophet].” Angel states “it appears he prophesied one or two generations after Haggai and Zechariah.” We do not know if Malachi was the prophet’s name. The word means “messenger” and may describe the man’s mission. The Babylonian Talmud Megilah 15a, identifies him as Mordecai.

The Targum states he was Ezra. And there are other opinions. Be this as it may, it is fascinating and insightful to read Angel's discussion of this issue since it enhances our understanding of the history of the time and how prophets functioned.

Malachi condemned the behavior of the priests who were leading Israel away from God. He also condemned intermarriage, a subject not mentioned by Hagai and Zechariah, although mentioned by Ezra and Nehemiah. Malachi's final prophecy, which is the Bible's final prophecy, is "I will send the prophet Elijah to you before the coming of the awesome, fearful day of the Lord."

Who is this Elijah? Is he the man who existed centuries before Malachi? Is he the person who the book calls Malachi? What is his mission? What is the "awesome, fearful day of the Lord"? Is this a prophecy of the messianic age? As with much else spoken by the three prophets, these final words are opaque, but we learn much by reading Angel's interpretation of the final prophet's last words, and all that he and the other two said before, why they said it, and its meaning for us today.