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The Koren Pirkei Avot with Rabbi Angel's commentary is available through the online store at jewishideas.org

Book Review
By Rabbi Dr. Israel Drazin

The Koren Pirkei Avot
Translation by Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks
Commentary by Rabbi Marc D. Angel
Koren Publishers, 2015, 175 pages

Jews and non-Jews have recognized the practical wisdom of many of the sayings in Pirkei Avot, “The Ethics of the Fathers,” and many Jews can quote its teachings from memory. Jews considered the Ethics of the Fathers so significant that many excellent commentaries have been written on the Ethics and the custom arose to read one chapter a week during the summer months.

But this Koren volume is unique in half a dozen ways that make it special. The Hebrew script and English translation are broken down, as is usual in Koren books, into easy to read phrases with excellent print. The translation of the six chapters by Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks is in modern English, with Rabbi Sacks sometimes paraphrasing the Hebrew text when it makes more sense to do so rather than presenting an awkward literal English translation. Rabbi Marc D. Angel has given a very learned introduction in which he points out, among much else, that “Great sages in ancient civilizations have provided teachings to help guide humanity to harmonious, happy, and wise lives. Among the wisest and most influential teachers were those of ancient Israel.”

Rabbi Angel offers explanation of all of the wise ancient sayings, presenting both traditional commentaries as well as learned thoughts by others, Jews and non-Jews, which add depth to the teachings of the fathers. He supplements the wise lessons of the ancients with modern information such as the following. An Israeli Nobel Prize winner described the “illusion of validity”: people tend to think their judgments are valid even when based simply on first impressions or relatively short observations and are often badly mistaken. A psychiatrist wrote that “We establish irrational ideals of the ‘real’ man and the ‘right kind’ of woman, which not only separates us more and more from our genuine potentialities, but in the long run also lead us into self-destructiveness.” The philosopher of the late first and early second century CE, Epictetus, warned “Know you not that a good man does nothing for appearance sake but for the sake of having done right.” An American scientist observed: “One human trait, urging us by our nature, is the drive to be useful.”

Rabbi Angel adds historical information. He describes, for instance, the period of the Great Assembly (a congress of some seventy elders), followed by the Zuggot (leadership by the pairs), followed by the governance by descendants of the family of Hillel, and gives biographical data about each man mentioned in the book. He notes that the Ethics “represents different generations and historical conditions in the Land of Israel,” and he explains the differences. He describes five periods. He tells how there are sayings of nineteen sages who lived prior to the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE; sixteen who flourished from 70 through the early second century when Israel was under the harsh dominion of Rome; fourteen between the early second century through the Bar Kokhba rebellion against Rome in 132-135; eleven sages following the rebellion through the late second century; and eight scholars who lived between the late second century through the early third century; sixty eight wise men in all.

The book is filled with a wealth of other information, inspiring stories, and the results of psychological experiments. For example: the psychologist Erich Fromm noted that most people fail in life because they are unable to make a decision when they come to metaphorical forks in the road; people are so impressed by being watched that when a picture of two eyes is painted on an honor box to pay for beverages, people paid more than twice as much for their drinks; nations perish when its people forget where they came from.

In short, while other commentaries on Pirkei Avot have much to offer, this volume will teach readers very much in an interesting, thought-provoking, and enjoyable manner.

(The Koren Pirkei Avot with Rabbi Angel's commentary is available through our Institute's online store: https://www.jewishideas.org/koren-pirkei-avot-commentary-rabbi-marc-d-angel)