Review of Rabbi Hayyim Angel's New Book

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Cornerstones: The Bible and Jewish Ideology, by Rabbi Hayyim Angel, Kodesh Press, 2020

Reviewed by Steven Gotlib

Let’s talk about Tanakh.

One of my biggest pet peeves about rabbinical school is that we just don’t spend much time (if any!) talking about Tanakh aside from when it’s cited in other works. I was always a bit confused about this. After all, Tanakh is the very cornerstone of our belief! What possible excuse could future rabbis have for not knowing it well? My desire to correct this for myself led me to study all the Tanakh that I could. Not only the books themselves, but scholarship as well.

It was this process that first introduced me to the prolific scholar, R. Hayyim Angel. I was amazed by his uncanny ability to reveal the depths of Tanakh, dissecting each layer of seemingly straight-forward narratives until his audience was blinded by their inner light. With each class that I listened to, I came away truly feeling like I had been handed “The Keys to the Palace,” to play on the title of one of his recent books.

Thanks to those experiences, as well as working under R. Angel as one of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals’ campus fellows, I knew that his next book would be one I’d want. “Cornerstones: The Bible and Jewish Ideology” did not disappoint. This volume is a celebration of everything I love about the study of Tanakh in general and R. Angel’s

methodology in particular, seeking to demonstrate once and for all that “the religious heart and soul of the Jewish people is the Hebrew Bible” (ix).

One way that R. Angel goes about this is by demonstrating that although the Written Law found in Tanakh can differ significantly from its Oral and more legally binding counterpart, “the Written Law still teaches central values of the Torah” (93). R. Angel explains that “the Talmud and Midrash, Jewish philosophy and mysticism, and Jewish thought all find their deepest roots in the Bible. For millennia, Jews and other faith communities have been transformed by this unparalleled collection of 24 books… When we learn and teach Tanakh properly, we convey a sense of holiness and reverence, coupled with respect for individuality and intellectual struggle with our most sacred texts and traditions” (185).

This way of learning can even involve academic methodology, provided it is coming from the right frame of mind. “To benefit from contemporary biblical scholarship properly, we must first understand our own tradition – to have a grasp of our texts, assumptions and the range of traditional interpretations… Religious scholarship benefits from contemporary findings [and] the academy stands to benefit from those who are heirs to thousands of years of tradition, who approach every word of Tanakh with awe and reverence, who care deeply about the intricate relationship between texts” (188).

In addition to stressing the importance of learning “Tanakh L’Shma” and “Tanakh U’Madda,” as I call them, R. Angel makes sure to emphasize that studying Tanakh as an academic interest alone is not enough. “One of the overarching goals of the Torah is to refine people’s moral character. Many laws and narratives overtly focus on morality, and many others inveigh against the immorality and amorality of paganism. The biblical prophets place consistency between observance of God’s ritual and moral laws at the very heart of their message” (52). The prophet Amos, for example, taught that “being God-fearing necessarily means rising to the highest levels or morality and social responsibility” (113).

To “just do it” may be enough for Nike, but not for the people of the Book. One must do what they do with an inspired spirit. With this in mind, R. Angel makes it clear that empowering and encouraging Jewish passion does not require us to reinvent the wheel. Rather, “[w]e must find [Judaism’s] most compelling elements within our classical sources and promote them. The best of Judaism has the power to attract and inspire many Jews and they in turn can create a positive model society to inspire humanity” (208). The values of Tanakh provide us a guide to living and thinking ideally. We need only to read and share it.

In addition to this selection of quotes, each chapter of “Cornerstones” adds something new to the table. Whether it’s timeless discussions of the land of Israel, loving the stranger, and the place of superstition, or hot topics like contemporary moral intuition, religious dogma, and day school curriculums, R. Angel is unafraid to unite classical and contemporary scholarship in the service of upholding Tanakh’s enduring resonance. Though some of the essays may seem a bit repetitive at times, each of these topics and more are treated thoroughly and thoughtfully by R. Angel. As the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals’

National Scholar, his authoring this volume certainly succeeds at showing his readers that a Judaism grounded in Tanakh is one that is “intellectually sound, spiritually compelling, and emotionally satisfying.” This collection of essays, many of which were previously published in the Institute’s *Conversations* journal, is a must-have for all who want to learn and teach Tanakh effectively.

I’ll end this review with the concluding paragraph of one of the volume’s most powerful essays: “We pray for a growing embodiment of the Torah’s ideals: a loving faithful marriage as the central bond for raising a family and transmitting religious values; a universal commitment to law and justice; a realization that all human beings are created in God’s image, with no racism, sexism, or other forms of discrimination; a universal desire to connect to God through living a life of holiness; a world where all evil is eliminated, and humanity serves God and lives ideal moral lives” (65-66).

Amen.

(Pre-orders of Rabbi Hayyim Angel's new book may be made on this link: https://www.jewishideas.org/corner-stones-bible-and-jewish-ideology-rabbi-hayyim-angel