Review of the Koren Mikraot Hadorot--an Impressive Torah Volume

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Rabbi Dr. Israel Drazin served for 31 years in the military and retired as a brigadier general. He is the author of more than 45 books, mostly on the Torah, and the acclaimed five books on Targum Onkelos.

While most books containing commentaries on the bible either focus on all five books of the Torah or just one of the five books, and then gives only the commentaries of about a dozen commentators as well as that of the author of the volume, Koren Mikraot Hadarot offers much more. It is part of a forthcoming series of 55 volumes. Five of the books of Exodus have been already been published, including this one on the portion read in synagogues on Shabbat February 6, 2021, called Yitro, as well as part of it is read in synagogue services during the evening of January 30 and the morning services of February 1 and 4. Each volume contains abridged excerpts from more than forty commentators from Philo (25 BCE-50 CE} and the early Midrashim until the present day.

The books are divided in to two parts. Opening the Yitro book from the right side are 43 pages with the Hebrew Torah text of Yitro, a new much improved translation of the Torah portion by the late Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, the commentary of Rashi in Hebrew with a new very readable English translation by Rabbi Sacks, such as rendering *eyl kana* in 20:5 not as “a jealous God,” but as “for I the Lord your God *demand absolute loyalty*,” a three-page discussion on the translation of Rashi, a page with the Ten Commandments with *Taam Elyon* (an alternate version for how the musical notes are in the prior Hebrew text), and the haftarah for Yitro in Hebrew and English translation. Readers will be delighted to find that Rabbi Sack’s translations make the biblical and Rashi texts clearer than in other volumes because Rabbi Sacks often adds words to clarify what the Bible and Rashi are saying. For example, Rashi’s Hebrew explanation why God stated He rested is unclear. Rabbi Sacks adds in brackets a clarifying sentence: “If God, who neither requires nor takes any respite, nevertheless is said to rest, then certainly people who strive and toil to exhaustion should rest on the Sabbath.”

Opening the book from the left side readers will find an additional 216 pages divided into four sections. (1) Commentaries from the early time of the sages. (2) The classic commentators.

(3) Confronting modernity. (4) Three essays surveying some of the previously mentioned remarks. Each of the first three sections begins with a chart showing the dates of the commentators. The commentaries are translated by Rabbi Jonathan Mishkin.

The first section has the ideas of 17 commentators from Philo, the Talmuds, and over a dozen different Midrashim from the beginning of the Common Era until the thirteenth century. Among the many comments is the view of Midrash Lekah Tov that the Torah was revealed to the Israelites at Sinai on a Shabbat. This Midrash also says that Mount Sinai was given this name because nations of the world were jealous and hated (*sina*) Israel who received the Torah while they did not. Mekhilta Derabbi Shimon states that there are two distinct prohibition in the Ten Commandments, one forbidding craving and another desiring. Philo contends that male and female servants must be given a rest on the Sabbath to teach them not to despair of better times that lay ahead when they will be free.

The second section contains interpretations from 14 sources from 1040 until 1619 such as Ramban (Nachmanides) saying that the opening words of the Ten Commandments “I am the Lord your God” is a positive command to know about God. Sforno writes that the Decalogue’s prohibition against making an image exists even if the image is not worshipped. Maimonides’ son explains “six days you shall work” does not require people to work, it only gives them permission to do so.

The third section has commentaries from ten sources from the eighteenth century to the present time. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, for example, states that when the Decalogue says “six days you shall work” the work should be viewed and performed as divine service. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik writes that the temple altar must not be made of hewn stones; it must contain imperfections that reflect the people offering sacrifices upon it.

In summary, this new series offers readers what could be called an encyclopedia of abridged interpretations from over 40 sources on a single biblical portion. While the original more detailed version of each source would give even more information, and it would have even been nicer if some other sages such as the teachings of the great Maimonides was included, and readers will not always agree with the comments of the sages who are included, what we are given is an enormous gift that will undoubtedly open our eyes and minds to the many ideas in the Torah and Jewish tradition, and will give us a delightful book to read on Shabbat.