Review of the Koren Edition of the Book of Samuel

View PDF



Rabbi Dr. Israel Drazin is author of many books, and he often reviews new books of Jewish interest.

An excellent new commentary of the biblical book Samuel

Review by Rabbi Dr. Israel Drazin

“The Koren Tanakh of the Land of Israel – Samuel,” published by Koren Publishers Jerusalem in 2021, is one of the best Bible commentaries in English. I say this because of its massive easy to read scholarly material on many far-reaching subjects, contributions by twenty renowned scholars, and because I see the value of this book after I used over a hundred such books while writing my own books on the Bible, such as my many volumes on the differences between the Hebrew Bible and its Aramaic translation called Onkelos, and after I have reviewed over 8,100 books, many dealing with the Bible.

This is the second volume in the Land of Israel series. The first focused on the second book of the Five Books of Moses, Exodus, which is equally praiseworthy. This one is on the book of Samuel, which like the first book of the Bible, Genesis, is interesting because it is filled with adventurous stories. In fact, the book of Samuel is for this reason taught in the elementary level in many Hebrew schools. This translation and commentary multiplies the enjoyment. The translation follows the suggestion of Maimonides to his own translator who translated his Arabic “Guide of the Perplexed” to Hebrew: Do not translate literally, word for word,

because what is idiomatic and makes sense in one language often does not make sense and sounds stilted when copied literally in another language. So, find the intent in the original and make the translation clear by inserting the intent, such as rendering vayehi vayamim harabim, which literally means “And it was many days,” should be rendered in Modern English as “Years passed.”

The extensive commentary with a seven page introduction to the book of Samuel is filled with enlightening and fascinating information on every page. It is by highly respected Modern Orthodox rabbis and scholars of many fields, and is very rational. Among much else, the volume explains the ancient practice of polygamy, The Lord of Hosts, why Israelites had Egyptian names, vows, bareness in the ancient Near East, wine with sacrifices, cultic objects, names having significance, symbolism of a raised horn, rock, fate, amulets, Sheol, a heavy hand, cherubim, and other terms, why leaders were anointed, priestly corruption, the three-pronged fork used with sacrifices, priestly garments, women in the priesthood in the ancient Near East, nighttime revelations, madness and superstition, prophets as royal advisers, the belief that God was present in the Ark, did God become emotionally angry, the Philistines’ golden mice, carts used in rituals, and much more.

A history of surrounding nation and their customs is included, including geography, archaeology, with information about the Philistines, Egyptology, and other nations. There are many maps, charts, timelines, dates, pictures of paintings by famed artists portraying events in this biblical book, and much more. There are articles on language, on what is Tanakh, the Tabernacle, ancient Hebrew, flora and fauna, Halakha, on the beginning of the monarchy in Israel, the reign of King David, did David learn from the Philistines, David’s campaigns, the authorship of the book of Samuel, why is necromancy forbidden, political marriages, and the variant versions from the Masoretic Text in the Septuagint and Dead Sea Scrolls.

Everyone reading the 505 pages of this excellent book or even browsing through it, whether Jew or non-Jew, even if the reader has a university education on the Bible or attended Orthodox yeshivot for many years, will benefit from this book a thousand-fold by learning more about the Bible, biblical history, its comparison

with the teachings of other ancient cultures, the history of the Jewish people, the making of the monarchy in Israel, and much more.