Mitchell First's book review of Rabbi Hayyim Angel's The Heart of the Five Megillot

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Rabbi Hayyim Angel

Mitchell First, an accomplished scholar in his own right, has published a review of Rabbi Hayyim Angel's new commentary, *The Heart of the Five Megillot*. It appeared in *The Jewish Link,* July 30, 2026, page 127.

Reviewing: “The Heart of the Five Megillot” by Rabbi Hayyim Angel (2026)

Rabbi Angel has just come out with his seventeenth book. The book consists of 15 articles on the five Megillot: Two on Esther, two on Shir HaShirim, one on Eichah, three on Ruth, six on Kohelet, and anappendix. The article in the appendix is also related to Kohelet, as I will explain.

A little background on Rabbi Angel: He is the National Scholar of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and
Ideals. He has taught advanced Bible courses at Yeshiva University since 1996. He lectures widely
throughout the U.S. on Tanach-related topics. He has authored over 150 articles, primarily Tanach-
related.

As always the case with Rabbi Angel, his articles all draw on classical rabbinical interpretation and the
best of contemporary scholarship.

I will briefly discuss a few of them.

One of the two Shir HaShirim articles is an extensive survey of the different approaches over the
centuries to the issue of the validity of a literal approach to Shir HaShirim.

Rabbi Angel phrases the question as: “Can a biblical text simultaneously express human erotic love
and the love of God- and be sanctified in doing so?” He explores the wide range of opinions found in
classical rabbinic commentary, modern Jewish thought, and contemporary academic scholarship.

Here is a summary of the various views among classic rabbinical commentaries:

1. The Song was initially composed as a human love poem and it was elevated to the sacred when
being edited into a biblical book. (That the poem was initially composed as a human love poem is the
view of most modern scholars.)

2. The song is an allegory in a general sense, but the interpreter must focus on the details of the
human love song.

3. The literal reading is necessary to understand the allegory, and the allegory is primary. (Rashi is one
who holds this view.)

4. Even where the simple meaning seems evident, we must interpret only the allegory. (This is the
view of Rabbi Ovadiah Seforno.)

As to the allegory, in traditional rabbinic literature most understand the Song as

symbolizing the
relationship between God and Israel. (But he does cite other midrashic views as to the second party.)
Rabbi Angel then discusses some of the various views in modern times. Of the many he discusses, I
liked the view of Rabbi Yuval Cherlow. In this view (unlike many others), there is one underlying story
being told. Rabbi Angel summarizes this view: “The man-whom he identifies as a king-and the woman-
who he identifies as a peasant who tends vineyards-must learn each other’s language and overcome the
staggering gulf between them to develop their loving relationship. Similarly, there is an infinite gulf

between God and people, leading to inherent religious challenges. Over the course of the Song, the
woman must learn the world of the king and its language rather than attempting to impose her world
onto her lover. So too Israel must learn God’s language in the Torah to develop a proper religious
relationship with God. The king must also learn the language and concerns of his beloved, and by
addressing them he gives her the opportunity to develop the relationship further. Rabbi Cherlow
maintains that the Song teaches that the key to developing one’s love of God is through an
understanding of human love.”

Rabbi Angel concludes his survey of the sources: “The Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies- not despite
its evocation of human passion, but because through it, we draw near to the deepest sanctuaries of
divine love.”

Rabbi Angel liked Rabbi Cherlow’s approach as well. His approach is set forth in a book Aharekha
Narutzah (2003) and Rabbi Angel’s second article on Shir HaShirim is entirely devoted to discussing

Rabbi Cherlow’s approach.

Of the three articles on the book of Ruth, one of them discusses the tremendous ambiguity we find in the book, which he feels is deliberate.

His first example of ambiguity is the first five verses. There is a juxtaposition of Elimelech’s departure and his death, and a juxtaposition of the sons’ marriages to Moabite women and their deaths. At first glance this suggests that the deaths are punishment for sins. As to the sons, their sin was intermarriage.
As to Elimelech, his sin was either leaving Eretz Yisrael or being a leader who left a starving community.
However, there is a ten-year gap between the sons marrying Moabites and their deaths. By including the lengthy time separating the two events, the text appears to exclude intermarriage as a direct cause of their deaths. We are also not told how long Elimelech remained in Moab before he died. These uncertainties yield at least three possible lines of interpretation.

1. Elimelech, Machlon and Chilion died after leaving Eretz Yisrael for legitimate reasons.(Ibn Ezra insists that Ruth and Orpah converted prior to their marriages.) The introductory verses are not describing punishment for sins. They are just giving background to the story.

2. The story is similar to the story of Job. The deaths and suffering at the outset of the book are theologically significant, but the reader is not told why.

3. This is a story of God giving just recompense. Elimelech, and Machlon and Chilion are being punished for their sins.

Rabbi Angel writes that reading #3 is possible but no more compelling than the other readings.
What about Naomi? Was she a passive follower of her husband, or an active participant in the
abandonment of a community (assuming there was one)? What about her motivations in attempting to

persuade Ruth and Orpah to stay in Moab? Were they totally unselfish? He concludes that she too can
be viewed in various ways: 1) a paragon of chesed, 2) self-serving, or 3) similar to Job.
He concludes that the deliberate ambiguities are precisely the vehicles through which the short
narrative captures so many subtleties. In holding multiple truths in tension, the narrative dignifies
human complexity.

(He writes that Ruth is the only character who is unambiguously described positively.)

There are many insights throughout his six articles on Kohelet. For example verse 1:18 reads: “For as
wisdom grows, vexation grows; to increase learning is to increase heartache.” How is anyone supposed
to interpret this verse? Seforno is forced to say: It refers to learning the wisdom of heretics! Rabbi Angel
views this comment as an example of a reinterpretation of the plain sense to avoid the consequences of
the meaning of the verse in the peshat—that Kohelet finds difficulty with genuine wisdom!"
The article in the Appendix is: “Afterlife in Jewish Thought.” It is relevant to Kohelet because that
work focuses on mortality, meaning and divine justice in this world alone and we might have expected
some mention of the afterlife here.

Rabbi Angel explains that the first explicit reference to a bodily resurrection in

Tanach is in
the book of Daniel. But the ideas underlying the afterlife can be traced back to the earliest texts in
Tanach. For example. at Genesis 25:8, we are told that Avraham was “gathered to his kin.”
Rabbi Angel further suggests that there is a good reason why the Torah and the Nach barely refer to
the afterlife. He writes: “The Torah and the prophets emphasize communal perfection. The ideal of
Tanakh is the messianic age, a perfected society and world harmony.” The ideal for an individual is not
his individual perfection so that he can obtain the afterlife. (Rambam perhaps held such a view but many
would disagree.) “The prophets always lived among the people…. They longed for Israel to become a
model nation that would inspire all humanity to serve God …We return to the Tanakh’s foundational
vision- not only of personal growth, but of a just and sacred society grounded in this world.”
We can all learn tremendous amounts from Rabbi’s Angel’s writings!

(Review ends here.)

Rabbi Angel's commentary is the first in a new series he is creating, The Heart of Tanakh. It is available at amazon.com here:

https://www.amazon.com/Heart-Five-Megillot-Tradition-Complexity/dp/B0H7VZKZ6M/ref=sr_1_1?crid=2FN80M3NQ0FOY&dib=eyJ2IjoiMSJ9.q0arA6lLJRf2-FVhgLvbTv6ImCntYCti5oOa3VxRugKfvJUs1twSotbLrns8pQe68iMsri-3efqJIiauj8SWWb6bhIBkkrgif_QcIMSOB4Z42Fkf-mF4K5QS5uZ1PTR5i1mTx94Y9w9XCuvUoAWszpfsBuTCjJfM-5nSSIC9u8DmTjYH7u291qD6DBXcmvqtwgEuaBtrJgv4.RUNlsGLDLTQzF07x4pKaND__RNiy391

The Heart of Tanakh series explores each biblical book through close textual analysis, classical Jewish commentary, and contemporary biblical scholarship. With the biblical text always at the center, each volume uncovers its literary artistry, historical setting, theological depth, and enduring religious and moral teachings. Written for both scholars and thoughtful general readers, the series shows how traditional learning and modern scholarship together illuminate the timeless message of Tanakh. Building on decades of teaching and writing, Rabbi Hayyim Angel offers a model of biblical interpretation in which rigorous scholarship and profound religious commitment work hand in hand, inviting readers to encounter the enduring voice of Tanakh with both intellectual honesty and spiritual depth.