

Rabbi Gil Student Reviews Rabbi Hayyim Angel's "Synagogue Companion"

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This review originally appeared in Jewish Action, the Magazine of the Orthodox Union, summer 2014, and is reprinted here with permission. Rabbi H. Angel's "Synagogue Companion" may be ordered through the online store at jewishideas.org. The "Synagogue Companion" is a publication of our Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

Rabbi Hayyim Angel is a wonderfully creative teacher of Tanach who has attempted something very daring in his latest book. The multiple books he has published in the past explore complex themes across the Bible. He utilizes commentaries throughout the ages but pays particular attention to recent studies, including critical academic works. He will take any perceptive insight that fits into the Orthodox view of the text, regardless of its source. Those books are Biblical analyses for advanced students by a master teacher. In A Synagogue Companion, Rabbi Angel attempts something completely different. Rather than addressing the advanced student, Rabbi Angel reaches out to the average synagogue attendee with deep literary insights into the holy text. This is a challenging task. He must balance the needs of his intended audience with the sophisticated methodologies and sources he uses. Yet he succeeds marvelously in this astonishingly simple yet profound book. On each parashah, Rabbi Angel writes a few short essays using primarily modern techniques of commentary to explain key themes and passages. With his exceptional clarity, he offers popular adaptations of critical and literary studies that are appropriate for synagogue reading (presumably in between aliyot). Because he is so meticulous at listing his sources, the reader sees the breadth of his reading and the humility of his writing, quoting web sites and scholarly journals that are insightful, even if outside mainstream scholarship. The result is stunning—thoughtful insights and ethical lessons that are relevant because they reflect timely concerns yet textually sound

because they emerge from rigorous analyses. The book concludes with similar studies of haftarot and, remarkably, prayer. Rabbi Angel applies these same methods of textual study to the prayerbook, enlightening and inspiring toward more meaningful tefillah. A Synagogue Companion is the rare commentary that offers profound insights for everyone, regardless of background, as long as they are interested in the synagogue texts.