"A Synagogue Companion" by Rabbi Hayyim Angel: Reviewed by Rabbi Israel Drazin

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Dr. Israel Drazin is the author of twenty-five books, including a series of five volumes on the Aramaic translation of the Hebrew Bible, which he co-authored with Dr. Stanley M. Wagner, and a series of four books on the twelfth century philosopher Moses Maimonides, which he wrote alone. His latest book is Mysteries of Judaism, which will be published by Gefen Publishing House in March. His website, visited by over 35,000 people annually is www.booksnthoughts.com.

Review by Israel Drazin
A Synagogue Companion, by Rabbi Hayyim Angel
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Rabbi Hayyim Angel is a scholar who writes very readable, interesting, and informative books. He presents “a vision of the Torah that is authentic, passionate,
reasonable, and embracing of people of all backgrounds.” He exposes the plain meaning of biblical texts. He raises thought-provoking questions. He shows that many biblical
books do not state what people think they state, and surprises and delights readers by revealing what the Bible actually says.

In his Synagogue Companion, Angel, the National Scholar of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, has brief essays of no more than a page and a half on the 54
Torah portions and the readings from the prophets that are recited with these portions, and short to-the-point articles on many prayers.

Starting his discussion of the Five Books of Moses, for example, he talks about the “clashes between the literal reading of the Torah and the findings of modern

science.”
He quotes and explains Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, “the verses do not pretend to teach us science, but rather spiritual ideas,” and Professor Yeshayahu Leibowitz that the idea that God “descended on Mount Sinai to compete with the professor who teaches history or physics is ludicrous, if not blasphemous.”

When speaking about the trees in the Garden of Eden, Angel tells us that “Professor Umberto Cassuto found that nearly every ancient mythology had a tree, a
plant, or a fountain of life. The quest for immortality was an obsession of the ancient world.” And Angel shows how this information helps us understand the depth of the Garden of Eden story.

The Bible gives no reason why Moses shattered the Decalogue, and many scholars offered their ideas. Rashbam thought that Moses was tired and dropped them
since he lost the energy to carry them. Nechama Leibowitz disliked his view: “Rashbam, a literalist par excellence, veers far from the plain sense here. There is no clue in the
text for his interpretation.” Professor Elazar Touito of Bar Ilan University suggested that Rashbam was engaged in an anti-Christian polemic. He was denying the medieval
Christian claim that Moses destroyed the tablets to show that God’s covenant with Israel was cancelled. Rashbam deflated this argument by stating in essence: no, he dropped the tablets by accident.

Rabbi Angel mentions the view of Malbim to contrast and later explore the differences between the leadership of Moses and his successor Joshua. When Moses had an experience of God at the burning bush in Exodus 3:5, he removed both shoes. When Joshua had a vision of the presence of an angel in Joshua 5:15, he stripped off a single shoe. “Shoes symbolize human involvement in the world. Jews are required to remove their shoes while in the Temple precincts and also on Yom Kippur to elevate themselves to the level of angels.” Moses reached the highest level. But according to Malbim’s analysis of Joshua’s “one sandal on, one sandal off” leadership he “had one foot in Moses’ ideal world of prophecy, but at the same time kept the other with his people.” Yet, his shortcomings “enabled Joshua to succeed as a leader in a manner that even his master could not.” Moses suffered continually from Israelite dissatisfactions, but Joshua never faced his people’s discontent.

Among much else about the Torah, Angel discusses the enigmatic, indeed incredible longevity of the early biblical people; the apparent revelation that God wanted humans before Noah to be vegetarians, Professor Uriel Simon's, Joseph Bekhor Shor's, Yehuda ha-Hasid's, Abarbanel's, and Ramban's explanations why Joseph, who had the ability to inform his grieving father that he was still alive, did not do so; and why the Torah ordered the creation of a hereditary priesthood.

Commenting upon Joshua 2, the prophetical haftarah reading for the Torah portion Shelah, Rabbi Angel points out that the Canaanite woman, Rahab, with whom Joshua's two spies communicated, referred to God several times when she assured the spies that the Israelites can easily defeat her people and conquer her land. Gersonides felt she was only flattering the spies to seduce them to accept the deal she planned to make with them. However several Midrashim took Rahab at her word; she genuinely accepted God and even converted (Mekhilta Yitro 1 and Deuteronomy Rabbah 2:28). "One rabbinic tradition asserts further that Rahab eventually married Joshua (Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 14b)." Whether one accepts these midrashic statements as historical facts, "our sages make a remarkable point: Someone from the lowest echelon of the most depraved society can convert sincerely and marry a prophet."

Angel contrasts Rahab's acts with the misdeed of the well pedigreed Achan of the tribe of Judah who in Joshua 6 and 7 is executed for plundering the city of Jericho against Joshua's religious ban. The contrast make crystal clear that it is not ethnic or pedigree that is significant, but behavior. "Canaanites such as Rahab who acted righteously were accepted, whereas Israelites who acted wickedly such as Achan were not accepted."

In his section on prayer, Angel discusses the meaning, purpose, and challenges of prayer; the origin of the leader of the prayers, called Hazan and Sheli'ah Tzibbur; the differences between biblical and pagan prayer; and the meaning of the more famous prayers, such as Shema and Amida. Among much else, he quotes Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik: "The foundation of prayer is not the conviction of its effectiveness but the belief that through it we approach God intimately."

In short, this book contains a wealth of information presented in a clear and interested manner by a scholar who understands his subject well.