

Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi
PROPHECY IN AN AGE OF UNCERTAINTY



Hayyim Angel

HAGGAI, ZECHARIAH,
AND MALACHI

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Maggid Books

*Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi
Prophecy in an Age of Uncertainty*

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Olivenhain, Vincent van Gogh, Saint-Rémy, 1889.

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Preface

I first prepared a course in Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi at Yeshiva University for the fall semester of 2000. A senior colleague learned of my intention to teach this course and approached me with the following advice: Teach Haggai first, and go very slowly. Then move on to Malachi, and teach it even slower. You then will run out of time and can safely avoid having to teach Zechariah.

Given the incredible difficulty of the Book of Zechariah, this was sage counsel. Nonetheless, I am grateful that I ignored it. Although certain sections of Zechariah are nearly impossible to decipher, Zechariah's visions and prophecies join those of Haggai and Malachi to create a mesmerizing portrait of the final words of biblical prophecy.

As preparations for that course unfolded, it became readily apparent that an in-depth study of the Book of Ezra-Nehemiah was necessary to understand the setting of the prophecies of Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. Each sacred text builds off of the other, revealing different dimensions of a critical juncture in Jewish history. The Second Temple period was a miraculous time of redemption, yet it fell considerably short of the expectations that had emerged from the earlier prophecies of Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Additionally, the institution of prophecy was to be replaced by the rabbinate.

This inquiry in turn demonstrated that the Book of Esther needed to be considered within this broader framework. That timeless narrative is set somewhere in between the beginning of the Book of Ezra-Nehemiah and its later sections, and addresses similar themes as the narratives and prophecies of that era.

Taken together, the biblical books of the Second Temple period are an illuminating group of texts that enable us so many years later to enter their world and grow religiously from this encounter. Many of the issues these prophets dealt with are also strikingly relevant in the modern period. This commentary integrates the Books of Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi with Ezra-Nehemiah and Esther. It is primarily the product of having taught the subject matter numerous times at Yeshiva University since the fall of 2000.

I am grateful to Rabbi Reuven Ziegler, chairman of the Koren Editorial Board, for inviting me to write this commentary. It is a privilege to contribute to a series dedicated to high-level, religious Tanakh scholarship being made accessible to the broader learning community. Thank you also to Deena Glickman, who has guided the process and made this commentary significantly better than what I had originally submitted to Maggid. I am also grateful to Maggid's assistant editor, Tomi Mager, and to proofreaders Oritt Sinclair and Shira Schreier for their help in bringing this book to completion.

I thank my father, Rabbi Marc D. Angel, the founder of The Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals (jewishideas.org). The Institute promotes a vision of the Torah that is authentic, passionate, reasonable, and embracing of people of all backgrounds. The Tanakh has always been the source of religious vision to Jews, and continues to play a central role in our ability to express Judaism as the great world religion that it is. It has been a pleasure and privilege working as the National Scholar of the Institute since 2013. It also has been gratifying serving as the Rabbinic Scholar at Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun in New York since 2014.

I thank my father for reading an earlier draft of this book and making many helpful suggestions. Thank you also to my student Jacob Pesachov who made a number of important suggestions.

I thank those who have contributed to the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals in honor of the publication of this book: The Levy

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As always, I thank my family for their constant love and support: Mom and Dad, Ronda and Dan, Elana and James, Jake, Andrew, Jonathan, Max, Charlie, Jeremy, and Kara. JoAnn, Matt and Erin, Nate and Kasey, Molly, Emily, Mimi and Papap. Since the publication of my last book, my grandmother, Dorothy Schuchalter, passed away. We all miss her, and may her memory always be a blessing.

Ve'aharonim havivim, I thank my wife Maxine for being a true life partner in all aspects of our lives and religious growth. The two greatest blessings of my life are being married to Maxine, and having our three children: our daughters Aviva Hayya and Dahlia Rachel, and our son, Mordechai Pinhas.

I am grateful to all those with whom I have learned Tanakh, developing exciting ideas, engaging our souls, and building a shared community of learning.

It is my hope and prayer that this commentary helps bring the world of Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi to life, and that it enables readers to better appreciate these prophets' ongoing relevance to our religious growth and experience.

Hayyim Angel
New York, NY
Rosh Hodesh Adar II
Spring, 2016

Introduction

The transition from the destruction of the First Temple to the construction of the Second Temple constitutes an exceptionally significant era in Jewish history. While many Jews returned to the Promised Land and rebuilt their Temple and community, most Jews chose to remain in the Diaspora. Israel was no longer an independent nation with its own king; it was a tiny vassal state within the vast Persian Empire. The majestic depictions of redemption by Israel's prophets – including Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel – appear to have been fulfilled only partially.

According to Jewish tradition, prophecy ceased with Malachi only a few generations after the initial Return to Zion in 538 BCE,¹ and Ezra and his colleagues laid the groundwork for the rabbinate. Instead of prophets and prophecy, the sages and Torah study became the religious guides and conscience of the Jewish community.

Tanakh fittingly devotes a significant amount of space to the narratives and prophecies of the Second Temple period. In the medieval system of chapter breaks in our printed Tanakhs, there are 929 chapters. Of those, 129 – or roughly one eighth – are comprised of Second Temple

1. See, e.g., Tosefta Sota 13:3; Yoma 9b; Sanhedrin 11a.

era books: Daniel (twelve), Ezra-Nehemiah (twenty-three),² Esther (ten), Chronicles (sixty-five), and Haggai-Zechariah-Malachi (nineteen).

Despite the fact that this was a critical period of transition from the realm of prophecy to the rabbinate, these books are often neglected. Even the most well-versed Jews may be found to have studied only Esther out of the aforementioned list. The underexposure to biblical books from the Second Temple period is unfortunate. These books pulsate with prophetic life and contain elements that are strikingly relevant to contemporary Jewish experience.

In this commentary, I hope to offer a vivid depiction of the prophecies of Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi within the context of the Second Temple era. In this spirit, I have written this composition with an eye toward creating an overarching framework for Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi together with the narratives in Ezra-Nehemiah and Esther. In order to view the books within their context, I analyze them chronologically. First, I survey Ezra chapters 1–6, which covers the period from 538 to 516 BCE. I then delve into Haggai and Zechariah chapters 1–8 and survey the central themes of Zechariah chapters 9–14. After those prophecies, I consider the Book of Esther in its surrounding historical context (483–473 BCE), and then turn to the next era, described in Ezra chapters 7–10 and Nehemiah chapters 1–13, which span the period from 458 to 433 BCE. Finally, I turn to Malachi, whose book is undated but whose prophecies relate substantially to the setting described in the later chapters of Ezra-Nehemiah. This contextual study will afford the reader a greater insight into the profound complexities of this transitional period.

A NOTE ON SOURCES AND TRANSLATIONS

The New Jewish Publication Society Tanakh's translation served as a basis for the biblical quotations presented here. When there are disagreements that affect the overall meaning of the passage, I cite differences of

2. In Bava Batra 14b–15a and Sanhedrin 93b, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah are considered to be one book, called "Ezra." See further discussions in Mordechai Zer-Kavod, introduction to *Daat Mikra: Ezra-Nehemiah* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1976), 7; Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, *In an Age of Prose: A Literary Approach to Ezra-Nehemiah* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 11–14.

opinion in the footnotes. Talmudic passages quoted in English are based on Soncino's translation of the Talmud. Translations of other passages are my own unless otherwise noted.

This commentary is based predominantly on classical rabbinic commentators. It also draws from the best of contemporary academic scholarship. A list of the Torah commentators cited more than once in the book, including biographical information, can be found in the appendix. Mordechai Zer-Kavod's illuminating *Daat Mikra* commentaries on Ezra-Nehemiah (published in 1980) and Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi (published in 1990)³ play an indispensable role in this volume.

I also consulted a number of academic commentaries and articles. The books used most significantly in preparing this commentary were Tamara Cohn Eskenazi's *In an Age of Prose: A Literary Approach to Ezra-Nehemiah*; Shemuel HaKohen's *Mavo LeSifrei Shivat Tziyon BaMikra*; Andrew E. Hill's *Anchor Bible: Malachi*; Carol L. Meyers and Eric M. Meyers' *Anchor Bible: Haggai, Zechariah 1–8*; Carol L. Meyers and Eric M. Meyers' *Anchor Bible: Zechariah 9–14*; and Zev Weissman et al.'s *Olam HaTanakh: Twelve Prophets*. I am profoundly indebted to all of the generations of scholars, down to the present, who have made such monumental efforts to make these biblical books more accessible to all.

THE TRANSITIONAL PERIOD: A TIME OF REDEMPTION OR DIVINE REJECTION?

Many Jews perceived the destruction of the First Temple and the Babylonian exile in 586 BCE as the end of Israel's singular covenantal relationship with God. Living at the time of the destruction, the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel devoted much energy to combatting this mistaken attitude. Jeremiah even prophesied a timetable of seventy years for the duration of the Babylonian Empire: "This whole land shall be a desolate ruin. And those nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years. When the seventy years are over, I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation and the land of the Chaldeans for their sins – declares the Lord – and I will make it a desolation for all time" (Jer. 25:11–12).

3. *Daat Mikra: Ezra-Nehemiah* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1980) [Hebrew]; *Daat Mikra: Twelve Prophets*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1990) [Hebrew].

In a separate prophecy, he added that when Babylonia fell, Israel would return to the Promised Land: “For thus said the Lord: When Babylon’s seventy years are over, I will take note of you, and I will fulfill to you My promise of favor – to bring you back to this place” (29:10).

Ezekiel’s vision of the dry bones in chapter 37 is one of the most celebrated prophecies of redemption in Tanakh. After the destruction of the First Temple, the people felt as though they were dead, with no chance of revival; they were sure that the God-Israel relationship had ended. Ezekiel prophesies a remarkable vision of bones coming to life in order to bring hope: “And He said to me: O mortal, these bones are the whole House of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, our hope is gone (*aveda tikvatenu*); we are doomed” (Ezek. 37:11). Both the people and the prophet are stunned by God’s bringing dry bones back to life. This vision is a parable for Israel; like dead bones, Israel feels hopeless, and God promises that He will restore life to the nation and return them to their land.⁴ Ezekiel prophetically envisions a detailed new Temple and the return of God’s presence (Ezek. 40–48).

After the nation had lived in exile for generations, there was a shocking turn of events. Approximately seventy years after its inception,⁵ the seemingly invincible Babylonian Empire suddenly collapsed in the wake of the Persian onslaught under Cyrus the Great. Even more remarkably, Cyrus permitted the Jews to return to Israel and rebuild the Temple. All of a sudden, the once seemingly impossible prophecies of Jeremiah and Ezekiel were being realized before the people’s eyes. The Book of Ezra opens with a reference to Jeremiah’s prophecies, celebrating this miracle of history:

-
4. Fittingly, the writer of “*HaTikva*” drew from this prophecy when composing what became Israel’s national anthem. Ezekiel speaks of the exiles saying that, “our hope is gone (*aveda tikvatenu*).” The anthem triumphantly responds, “We have not yet lost our hope (*od lo aveda tikvatenu*)!”
 5. Nebuchadnezzar assumed the throne in 605 BCE, and Cyrus the Great permitted the Jews to return in 538 BCE. Although this amounts to only sixty-seven years, it is common in Torah sources to round numbers up or down, and thus this time period is considered to be in accordance with Jeremiah’s prophecy.

In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, when the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah was fulfilled, the Lord roused the spirit of King Cyrus of Persia to issue a proclamation throughout his realm by word of mouth and in writing as follows, “Thus said King Cyrus of Persia: “The Lord God of Heaven has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and has charged me with building Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judea.” (Ezra 1:1–2)

Zerubbabel and Joshua led the community during this period, and they were the ideal people for the roles. Zerubbabel was an heir to the Davidic line, and his royal pedigree likely fueled hopes that he would eventually become king of the fledgling community. Zerubbabel’s potential candidacy for the messianic Davidic kingship predicted by the prophets looms large in the prophecies of Haggai and Zechariah. Joshua, the righteous High Priest, was the grandson of Seraiah, the High Priest killed by the Babylonians during the destruction of the First Temple. They returned to Israel with throngs of Jews and immediately set out to rebuild the Temple.

And yet, while it initially seemed as through the messianic redemption was occurring, several significant imperfections called this belief into doubt. It was clear that the community would not be able to afford a Temple as lavish as the First Temple built by King Solomon. Moreover, according to rabbinic tradition, the Ark was missing, and it appears that the Second Temple contained additional spiritual shortcomings (as discussed in Yoma 21b; see below).

On the political level, Judea was a tiny vassal state in the vast, powerful, and pagan Persian Empire. Zerubbabel was a governor, not a king. The Jews were entirely vulnerable to the whims of the Persian government, and their local enemies used their clout to thwart the building of the Temple and the walls of Jerusalem, and to persecute the Jewish community, throughout this period. There were droughts and widespread poverty, and sometimes those Jews who abandoned the Torah were able to move up the social ladder, while those who remained righteous suffered for their faithfulness. Despite the miracles of history and partial fulfillment of the prophecies of redemption, it was a far cry from the Messianic Era.

A related theme that appears in the era's books is the inter-relationship between God's presence and the Persian Empire. Throughout the Tanakh's Second Temple era books, there is a pervasive sense that the Persian Empire is ever-present and all-powerful, whereas God is perceived as having disappeared, or working from behind the scenes. The lack of a manifestation of God's glory was cause for great concern among the Jews; their prophets had envisioned a full manifestation following the rebuilding of the Temple.

Many in the Jewish community wondered whether this complex period was indeed a period of redemption, or whether God had terminated His relationship with Israel after the destruction of the First Temple. The Jews rebuilt the Temple and the walls of Jerusalem, and struck a renewed covenant accepting the Torah. Yet God still did not manifest His presence. The Jews had no king; they were weak and vulnerable, and the Persian Empire dominated the region.

In retrospect, we know that this period was not the time of the full redemption. Instead, it served as a critical transitional period as prophecy ended and the rabbinate began. However, Haggai and Zechariah prophetically sensed the enormous potential of this phase; the redemption could have been fully realized in their time. This is one of the most important keys to understanding their prophecy within its context.

PROPHECY AS POTENTIAL

The Jews were confused; were they living in a period of divine redemption or had God rejected them following the destruction of the First Temple? Mirroring this complexity, the prophecies of Haggai and Zechariah present further ambiguities regarding whether this was a period of messianic redemption or not. Throughout the books of the Prophets, including Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, there are prophecies of consolation. While many prophecies do not specify a particular time period for their fulfillment, others, such as the prophecies of Haggai and Zechariah, appear to predict imminent events. Yet many of these predictions remained unfulfilled, and we continue to wait for the Messiah to this day. How do we understand the short-term prophecies that remained unfulfilled?

For centuries, commentators stood at an interpretive impasse. Some insisted that if the prophecies were unfulfilled, they must have been predicting the eventual Messianic Age. Others, however, maintained that the short-term prophecies described a more modest scene than that of the grand-scale Messianic Age, and therefore they must have been fulfilled at the time. Both positions were beset with weaknesses, and neither side could persuade the other.⁶

In the nineteenth century, however, Malbim broke this impasse by quoting talmudic passages that suggest that prophecy predicts what *should* happen, but not necessarily what *will* happen. Thus many prophecies of redemption that sound like they should have been fulfilled in the short term, had the potential to come true.⁷ Ideally, these prophecies could and should have been realized in the period of the prophets. Since they were not fulfilled then, they were deferred until an indeterminate later period, and will be fulfilled when the Messiah comes.

In this spirit, Malbim explains that Haggai's prophecy reflects a state of potential; that period *could* have been the Messianic Age, but it became a failed opportunity once the people proved unworthy of full redemption. The same premise holds true regarding Zechariah's prophecies in chapters 1–8. Malbim quotes the Talmud: “The sages say, ‘The intention was to perform a miracle for Israel in the days of Ezra, even as it was performed for them in the days of Joshua bin Nun, but sin caused [the miracle to be withheld]’” (Berakhot 4a). Malbim continues:

When the Temple was built, this chance still existed, and had they repented then, Zerubbabel would have been the messianic king and the Temple would have been God's dwelling forever. For this reason, the light of prophecy again shone on the last

6. For analysis of this debate as it pertains to the first twelve chapters of Isaiah, see Hayyim Angel, “Prophecy as Potential: The Consolations of Isaiah 1–12 in Context,” *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (2009): 3–10; reprinted in Angel, *Revealed Texts, Hidden Meanings: Finding the Religious Significance in Tanakh* (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav-Sephardic Publication Foundation, 2009), 117–126.

7. As the Tosafists stated centuries earlier, “prophets do not prophesy except what should occur if there is no sin” (*Tosafot*, Yevamot 50a, s.v. *teda*).

prophets – Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi – who arose and encouraged them to build the Temple and to repent, and who revealed the secret that [the redemption] depended on them. Since they were unworthy, the Second Temple was only temporary, to be destroyed one day by the Romans. And it lacked five things that our sages enumerated (Yoma 21b). (Malbim on Hag. 1:1)

Haggai and Zechariah prophetically portrayed their period as one of immense potential, in which the messianic redemption could be realized. However, the people needed to play an active religious role in attaining that redemption. The messianic redemption, sadly, was not achieved then.

Significantly, the prophecies of redemption in Zechariah 9–14 and Malachi are set in a distant future. It appears that after the Messianic Era was not realized with Zerubbabel as king, there was no longer a sense of imminent fulfillment of the prophecies of redemption. Thus the Messiah was deferred to the future.

Malbim's view will be applied systematically throughout this commentary, as it provides the key to understanding the many prophecies that reflected the short-term future, yet remained unfulfilled.⁸

PERSIAN CHRONOLOGY

An understanding of the prophets' historical context offers a greatly refined sense of their messages to their original audiences. The Talmud states that the books of Tanakh were included in the canon because of their enduring religious value: "Only the prophecy which contained a lesson for future generations was written down, and that which did not

8. In contrast to the position of the Talmud and Malbim discussed above, Maimonides maintained that prophecies of a positive nature must be fulfilled in their entirety (*Laws of the Foundations of the Torah* 10:4). However, many other commentators disagree with Maimonides, based primarily on Jer. 18:7–10, where Jeremiah equates positive and negative prophecies in terms of their being vulnerable to changes in people's behavior. For further discussion, see Hayyim Angel, "Where the Rules of *Peshat* and *Pesak* Collide: Deuteronomy and Prophetic Narratives," in Angel, *Creating Space between Peshat and Derash: A Collection of Studies on Tanakh* (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav-Sephardic Publication Foundation, 2011), 52–63.

contain such a lesson was not written” (Megilla 14a). At the same time, Rashi distinguishes between the Torah and the Prophets: “The Torah of Moses is called *Torah* (teaching), because it was given for all generations. The Prophets are called only *kabbala* (reception), since they received each prophecy, through divine inspiration, for the needs of their time and generation” (Rashi on *Hullin* 137a). The Torah’s primary audience is all Jews of all times. In contrast, the prophets initially addressed the generations in which they lived. Only later were those words which contained eternal messages preserved. To appreciate the eternal, we must delve into the temporal. For this reason, this commentary seeks to study the prophecies of Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi in their own context.

Much has been written regarding the conflicts between the chronologies of the period of the Persian Empire adopted in the classical rabbinic literature, as outlined in *Seder Olam Rabba* and later midrashic collections, and the conventional chronology accepted by most contemporary scholars. The latter takes into account the wealth of information gleaned from ancient historical records, which have become accessible in recent generations.

An in-depth study of the debate goes beyond the purview of this volume, but it is important to note that many classical commentators, including Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Radak, and Abrabanel, raised questions, based on biblical evidence, against the midrashic chronology. Malbim acknowledged that access to the ancient histories discovered in his lifetime generated confusion and uncertainty concerning the Persian chronology. For the purposes of this commentary, we will follow the contemporary conventional dating system adopted by the *Daat Mikra* commentary series published by Mossad HaRav Kook.⁹

9. Interested readers may look at the following references for further discussion: Shemuel HaKohen, *Mavo LeSifrei Shivat Tziyon BaMikra* (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1987), 59–79. For a book-length survey of rabbinic opinions, see Mitchell First, *Jewish History in Conflict: A Study of the Major Discrepancy between Rabbinic and Conventional Chronology* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc., 1997). For a more general religious approach to addressing conflicts between rabbinic histories and contemporary sources, see Mordechai Breuer, “Teaching of History and Faith in the Sages,” *Shematin* 36–37 (1973): 52–62 [Hebrew].

Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi

Based on the conventional chronology, the Persian emperors who reigned during the biblical period were:

Cyrus the Great (<i>Koresh</i>)	539–530
Cambyses (never mentioned in Tanakh)	530–522
Darius I (<i>Daryavesh</i>)	522–486
Xerxes (Ahasuerus) ¹⁰	486–465
Artaxerxes I (<i>Artahshasta</i>)	465–423

Although the Book of Nehemiah ends in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes, or 433 BCE, the Persian Empire existed for approximately another century until it was defeated by Alexander the Great. Artaxerxes I is the last Persian emperor mentioned in Tanakh.

The following summary chart integrates the Books of Ezra-Nehemiah, Esther, Haggai, and Zechariah into the above chronological framework:

Chapters	Jewish Leader(s)	Persian Emperor(s)	Years	Major Events
Ezra 1–4	Sheshbazzar Zerubbabel Joshua	Cyrus II ("The Great")	538–536	Return to Zion: 42,360 people return to Israel, build the altar, and begin lay- ing the foundations of the Temple
Ezra 5–6 Haggai Zechariah	Zerubbabel Joshua	Darius I	520–516	Rebuilding is encour- aged after a hiatus due to enemy inter- ference; completion of the Second Tem- ple; celebration
Ezra 4:6	None mentioned	Xerxes	Beginning of his reign	A letter written by the Jews' enemies

10. For analysis and references to those who identify Ahasuerus with Xerxes, see Mitchell First, *Esther Unmasked: Solving Eleven Mysteries of the Jewish Holidays and Liturgy* (New York: Kodesh Press, 2015), 129–141.

Chapters	Jewish Leader(s)	Persian Emperor(s)	Years	Major Events
Book of Esther	Mordecai Esther	Xerxes	483–473	Purim story
Ezra 7–10	Ezra	Artaxerxes	458–457	Ezra comes to Israel, fights intermarriage
Ezra 4:7–23	None mentioned	Artaxerxes	Unspecified time during his reign (he reigned from 465 to 423)	Rehum and Shimshai (enemies of the Jews) convince Artaxerxes to stop construction of Jerusalem's walls
Nehemiah 1–13	Nehemiah Ezra	Artaxerxes	445–433	Nehemiah rebuilds Jerusalem's walls, enacts social reform, enforces halakhic observance, inspires religious revival and covenant

METHODOLOGY: INTEGRATING TRADITION AND CONTEMPORARY SCHOLARSHIP

The methodology in this commentary is *peshat*-based (based on the simple understanding of the text), motivated by an unwavering attempt to understand biblical verses in their literary and historical context. The world of Midrash offers nuance and depth to many areas of textual analysis and Jewish thought, and I will engage in its teachings to broaden and deepen the discussion. Before proceeding, it is worthwhile to present an overview of the central methodological principles used through the commentary.¹¹

11. This section is adapted from Hayyim Angel, “From Black Fire to White Fire: Conversations about Religious Tanakh Learning Methodology,” in Angel, *Revealed Texts, Hidden Meanings: Finding the Religious Significance in Tanakh* (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav-Sephardic Publication Foundation, 2009), 1–18; reprinted in Angel, *Peshat Isn't So Simple: Essays on Developing a Religious Methodology to Bible Study* (New York: Kodosh Press, 2014), 11–27.

R. Pinḥas says in the name of R. Shimon b. Lakish: The Torah that the Holy One, blessed be He, gave to Moses was given to him from white fire inscribed by black fire. It was fire, mixed with fire, hewn from fire and given by fire, as is written, “From His right a fiery law to them.” (Y. Shekalim 6:1, 25b, quoting Deut. 33:2)

This mesmerizing midrash, so emblematic of Jewish thought, captures the life force of Torah. It is not merely dry ink written on dead parchment. Its words live, and the silent white parchment beneath them represents the non-verbal depth and sanctity underlying God’s revealed word.

In his introduction to Song of Songs, Malbim addresses the religious imperative to begin all learning with *peshat* and only then to move to deeper levels:

Most interpretations [of Song of Songs]...are in the realm of allusion and *derash*, distant from the settlement of *peshat*.... Of course we affirm that divine words have seventy facets and one thousand dimensions. Nonetheless, the *peshat* interpretation is the beginning of knowledge; it is the key to open the gates, before we can enter the sacred inner chambers of the King.

If we attempt to penetrate the deeper levels of Tanakh without first examining its words in their context, we will end up staring at blank parchment. Alternatively, if we focus on the words without seeing them as a means to the higher end of encountering God, we are left with ink but no fire.

When learning Torah, we struggle to balance rigorous analysis and religious experience. Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein touches on this balance in a broader analysis of Modern Orthodoxy:

I believe that the sin lurking at the door of the Centrist Orthodox or Religious Zionist community, the danger which confronts us and of which we need to be fully aware, is precisely the danger of forgetfulness (*shikheḥa*). Unlike other communities, this is a community which is not so susceptible to idolatry (*avoda zara*)

in its extension – attitudes the Rambam battled against, such as superstition and gross or primitive conceptions of God – because it is more sophisticated intellectually, religiously, and philosophically. Unfortunately, however, it is very, very susceptible to extended heresy (*kefira*) or forgetfulness, lacking the immanent sense of God felt so deeply, keenly, and pervasively in other parts of the halakhically committed Jewish world.¹²

Another ever-present struggle relates to turning to the talmudic sages and post-talmudic rabbinic commentators for guidance. These commentators were truly exceptional religious scholars who viewed the biblical text as the revealed word of God, and therefore they serve as our ultimate teachers. Their words serve as the basis for this commentary. However, it is essential to consider them as our “eyes on the text” rather than as substitutes for the text.¹³ We must try to learn Tanakh in the same manner as our classical commentators did. They teach us how to learn and think, but we must distinguish between text and interpretation.

Much has been written to define the term *peshat*, and I prefer the working definition that *peshat* is the primary intent of the author.¹⁴ On each verse, however, there may be a debate as to the primary intent. How should we proceed if even our greatest interpreters are uncertain? Addressing this critical issue, Nahmanides stresses that Torah study is not an exact science, and is subject to strands of interpretation that require careful evaluation:

12. Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, *By His Light: Character and Values in the Service of God*, adapted by Rabbi Reuven Ziegler (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2016), 172.

13. See Hayyim Angel, “The Paradox of *Parshanut*: Are Our Eyes on the Text, or on the Commentators? Review Essay of *Pirkei Neḥama: Neḥama Leibowitz Memorial Volume*,” *Tradition* 38, no. 4 (Winter 2004): 112–128; reprinted in Angel, *Peshat Isn’t So Simple*, 36–57.

14. Surveys of traditional understandings of the term *peshat* can be found in Rabbi Menahem M. Kasher, *Torah Shelema* (Monsey: American Biblical Encyclopedia Society, 1956), 17:286–312; David Weiss Halivni, *Peshat and Derash: Plain and Applied Meaning in Rabbinic Exegesis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 52–88; Moshe Ahrend, “Towards a Definition of the Term ‘*Peshuto Shel Mikra*,’” in *HaMikra BeRe’i Mefarshav: Sara Kamin Memorial Volume*, ed. Sara Japhet (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1994), 237–261 [Hebrew].

Anyone who studies our Talmud knows that the arguments between its interpreters do not contain absolute proofs.... It is not like mathematics.... Rather, we must exert all of our efforts in every debate to push aside one of the views with compelling logical arguments...and consider most likely the view that fits the smooth reading of the text and its parallels along with good logic. This is the best we can do, and the intent of every wise and God-fearing person studying the wisdom of the Talmud. (Introduction to his *Milḥamot Hashem* commentary on the Talmud)

The halakhic sections of the Talmud are generally taken literally and accepted as binding.¹⁵ In contrast, the Aggadic passages are often allegorical. Even when they are understood literally, later commentators reserve the right to disagree with them.¹⁶ This leads to the question of the appropriate balance between *hiddush* (novel interpretations) and time-honored understandings of the text. It can be difficult to reevaluate time-honored interpretations, even when attractive alternatives present themselves. Rashbam, citing his grandfather Rashi's paradigmatic integrity in learning, teaches that the infinite depth of Tanakh necessarily means that we can never exhaust its meaning:

15. It is important to note that while later rabbinic commentators generally defer to the halakhic rulings of the Talmud, this principle is not universally adopted. See, e.g., Marc B. Shapiro, "Maimonidean Halakhah and Superstition," in his *Studies in Maimonides and His Interpreters* (Scranton: University of Scranton Press, 2008), 95–150. Shapiro documents many examples in which Maimonides deviated from talmudic halakhic rulings (or simply ignored them) when he believed them to be based on superstitions. Given the reservations post-talmudic commentators generally have about disregarding talmudic rulings, Shapiro concludes that Maimonides was "unprecedented and courageous" in taking those positions. His conclusion highlights how unusual Maimonides' stance was among halakhic decisors.

16. See, e.g., Rabbi Marc D. Angel, "Authority and Dissent: A Discussion of Boundaries," *Tradition* 25, no. 2 (Winter 1990): 18–27; Rabbi Haim David HaLevi, *Aseh Lekha Rav*, vol. 5, resp. 49 (pp. 304–307); Rabbi Michael Rosensweig, "Elu VaElu Divrei Elokim Hayyim: Halakhic Pluralism and Theories of Controversy," *Tradition* 26, no. 3 (Spring 1992): 4–23; Marc Saperstein, *Decoding the Rabbis: A Thirteenth-Century Commentary on the Aggadah* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 1–20.

Rabbi Solomon [i.e., Rashi], my mother's father, the enlightener of the eyes of the exiles, interpreted Tanakh according to its plain sense. And I, Samuel the son of Meir...debated with him in his presence. He admitted to me that were he to have more time, he would have had to compose different commentaries in accordance with the new interpretations that are innovated each day. (Rashbam on Gen. 37:2)

Abrabanel writes similarly:

And even though the hearts [i.e., minds] of the ancients are like the opening of the *ulam* [the great open area in front of the Temple]...and we are nothing,¹⁷ still we have a portion and inheritance in the house of our Father, and there are many openings [to advance fresh insights] for us and our children forever. Always, all day long, a latter-day [sage] will arise... who seeks the word of the Lord – if he seeks it like silver he will... find food for his soul that his ancestors did not envisage; for it is a spirit in man, and the Lord is in the heavens to give wisdom to fools and knowledge and discretion to the youth. (*Ateret Zekenim*, 3)¹⁸

Simultaneously, it is worthwhile to ask cautiously *why* nobody has thought of a particular novel idea. If there are fifteen proposed answers to a problem, there is room for a sixteenth. Nevertheless, it serves us well to consider and evaluate the earlier fifteen before reaching conclusions.

Perhaps the most challenging road to navigate pertains to the use of non-Orthodox scholarship. On the one hand, Jewish tradition's commitment to truth should lead us to accept the truth from whoever says it. Maimonides lived by this axiom,¹⁹ and many of the greatest rabbinic

17. Abrabanel is paraphrasing Eiruvin 53a.

18. Translation in Eric Lawee, *Isaac Abarbanel's Stance toward Tradition: Defense, Dissent, and Dialogue* (New York: SUNY Press, 2001), 63.

19. In his introduction to *Pirkei Avot* (*Shemona Perakim*), Maimonides writes:

Know that the things about which we shall speak in these chapters and in what will come in the commentary are not matters invented on my own.... They are

figures before and after him similarly espoused this principle.²⁰ On the other hand, it is difficult to distinguish between knowledge and theory. Theory is almost always accompanied by conscious and unconscious biases, some of which may stray from traditional Jewish thought and belief.

This tension within tradition is expressed poignantly in an anecdote related by Rabbi Joseph ibn Aknin (c. 1150–c. 1220). After noting the works of several great rabbinic predecessors who utilized Christian and Muslim writings in their commentaries, he quotes a story related by Samuel HaNagid (993–1056):

Rabbi Mazliaḥ the son of Albazek the rabbinic judge of Saklia told [Samuel HaNagid] when he came from Baghdad ... that one day in [Rabbi Hai Gaon's (939–1038)] yeshiva they studied the verse, "Let my head not refuse such choice oil" (Ps. 141:5), and those present debated its meaning. Rabbi Hai of blessed memory told Rabbi Mazliaḥ to go to the Catholic Patriarch and ask him what he knew about this verse, and this upset [Rabbi Mazliaḥ]. When [Rabbi Hai] saw that Rabbi Mazliaḥ was upset, he rebuked him: "Our saintly predecessors who are our guides solicited information on language and interpretation from many religious communities – and even of shepherds, as is well known!"²¹

matters gathered from the discourse of the sages in the Midrash, the Talmud, and other compositions of theirs, as well as from the discourse of both the ancient and modern philosophers and from the compositions of many men. Hear the truth from whoever says it.

Translation in Raymond Weiss and Charles Butterworth, *Ethical Writings of Maimonides* (New York: Dover, 1983), 60.

20. See, for example, Ephraim E. Urbach, "The Pursuit of Truth as a Religious Obligation," in *HaMikra VaAnahnu*, ed. Uriel Simon (Ramat-Gan: Institute for Judaism and Thought in Our Time, 1979), 13–27 [Hebrew]; Uriel Simon, "The Pursuit of Truth that Is Required for Fear of God and Love of Torah," in *HaMikra VaAnahnu*, 28–41 [Hebrew]; Marvin Fox, "Judaism, Secularism, and Textual Interpretation," in *Modern Jewish Ethics: Theory and Practice*, ed. Marvin Fox (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1975), 3–26.
21. *Hitgalut HaSodot VeHofaat HaMeorot*, ed. Abraham S. Halkin (Jerusalem: Mekitzei Nirdamim, 1964), 493–495. In Haggiga 15b, God Himself initially refused to quote

Contemporary scholarship has contributed significantly to the understanding of Tanakh. We have access to considerably more historical background than our forebears, thanks to the archaeological findings of the past two centuries. The development of literary tools, linguistic studies, and many other aspects of Bible scholarship have made remarkable contributions. This is why Mordechai Zer-Kavod's illuminating *Daat Mikra* commentaries, as well as other contemporary scholarship, are essential resources, and I draw extensively from them in the present volume.

In a sense, true learning is unsettling, since it is difficult to maintain a view passionately when we are conscious that at any moment we may learn a new opinion that challenges our conviction. At the same time, precisely this energy is one of the most invigorating aspects of Torah study. When kept in balanced focus, the tensions and conflicts that confront us in traditional study afford constant opportunities to learn from the past wealth of interpretation, while forging ahead in our attempts to enter the infinite world of Tanakh, so that we may encounter God in His palace.

R. Meir in the heavenly court since R. Meir continued to learn from his teacher Elisha b. Avuya, even after the latter had become a heretic. However, Rabba protested God's policy, stressing that R. Meir carefully sifted out the valuable teachings from the inessential "peel." Consequently, God reversed Himself and began quoting "His son" R. Meir in the heavenly court.