

BOOK REVIEW

I Kings – Torn in Two by Alex Israel. Har Etzion: Maggid Books, 2013, 350 pages. Reviewed by Gad Dishy.

This is a recent and welcome addition to the English language "Maggid Studies in Tanakh" series. The challenge of providing clear and concise studies that highlight the relevance of Kings to the modern era is a formidable one which the author, Rabbi Alex Israel, has successfully met head on. He provides a chapter- by-chapter analysis of diverse topics, including national unity, prophecy, the institution of the monarchy, and the Temple.

The feeling one has after reading this work is rather like the satisfaction of holding a solved Rubik's cube. The author combines an array of rabbinical sources with a generous sprinkling of academic references to produce a work that while committed to tradition is intellectually honest. At the same time, he walks the fine line between sublime reverence and stinging condemnation when dealing with the grave offenses of both David and Solomon. These delicate balances are hallmark features of the new school of biblical studies that has burgeoned in recent decades. The Maggid series seems dedicated to promote this line of study and will no doubt be well received by an eager market.

In furthering this unique combination, the book points up textual nuances of seemingly minor literary issues and shows how they reflect issues of national import. For example, the author cites A. Grossman's understanding that the otherwise tedious list of Solomon's administrative regions in chapter 4 may perhaps indicate that the tribe of Judah had received tax-exempt status, thereby contributing to the revolt against Rehoboam and the eventual division of the kingdom. As a further illustration, when dealing with the chapters relating the detailed construction of the Temple, the author culls the universal message of spreading "light unto the nations" from the architectural design of a window.

Gad Dishy received rabbinic ordination from Yeshiva University and has an M.A. in Bible from Bar Ilan University. He is the author of Jacob's Family Dynamics: Climbing the Rungs of the Ladder (Devora Publishing, 2009), and has lectured internationally on biblical studies. He is a practicing real estate attorney licensed in New York and Israel. He and his family live in Alon Shevut, Israel.

The book also weaves liturgical references throughout his analysis, which helps add vibrancy and relevance to the study of these ancient writings. The ability to relate the dialectic between Temple and Tabernacle to the oscillation in the *Kedushah* prayer between God's not having a place ("The whole world is filled with His glory") and having one ("Blessed is the glory of the Lord from His place . . . When You will reign in Zion") is a great advantage when dealing with seemingly dry details.

Particularly illuminating is the analysis of chapter 13, which deals with the enigmatic episode of the prophet from Judah. This "man of God" is divinely instructed to deliver an ominous message to Jeroboam and condemn the latter's newly instituted cultic practices. Citing biblical scholar Uriel Simon, the author notes how the particular divine command not to return the way he came stems from the belief that doing so would negate the previous journey. Thus, when the old prophet tricks the prophet from Judah into violating God's word and backtracking on his route, the "man of God" is punished by being killed by a lion. The study points out how the wavering attitude of the old seer, a true prophet of God who did not attend Jeroboam's idolatrous sacrifice, yet lied and entrapped the prophet from Judah, represents the mixed emotions of the nation in adopting the cultic reforms of Jeroboam.

After my own three years of academic research into the chapters dealing with Elijah and Ahab, I find that Alex Israel's analysis does justice to the intricacies therein. For example, when discussing the conflict with Aram in chapter 20, he reviews Ahab's political motivation for sparing the life of Ben-hadad, which might have been the possibility of an alliance against Assyria, as reflected in the Kurkh Monolith. In addition to such archaeological data, the author cites an educational message provided by Nehamah Leibowitz. She explains that Ahab kept Ben-Hadad alive because of the solidarity between fellow monarchs. By analyzing the juridical parable, Rabbi Israel shows how Ahab misappropriated the victory as his own triumph instead of ascribing it to God. Indeed, I would view it as a statement about the institution of monarchy itself. This multi-faceted approach offers a fresh look at the Book of Kings as it affects broader national issues.

Occasionally, slight inaccuracies have crept into the text, such as repeated references to Ahab striking the prophet Micaiah when it was actually Zedekiah who did so; or attributing the marriage of Ahab and Jezebel to the initiative of Ahab's father, Omri, when it is apparent from the text that their union took place only after the death of Omri, as an alliance motivated by Ahab's foreign policy.

The reader is granted a special treat at the end of the book, with pages of useful and stimulating study questions arranged according to chapter, making it ideal for teachers. Unfortunately, without closely examining the table of contents, no one is likely to realize that this excellent material is available. It could have been mentioned in the introduction, or each chapter might have had a footnote or a concluding sentence referring the reader to the relevant page of study questions. Nonetheless, anyone preparing to teach the subject will undoubtedly consult this reference work and utilize the questions listed to generate thought and discussion.



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