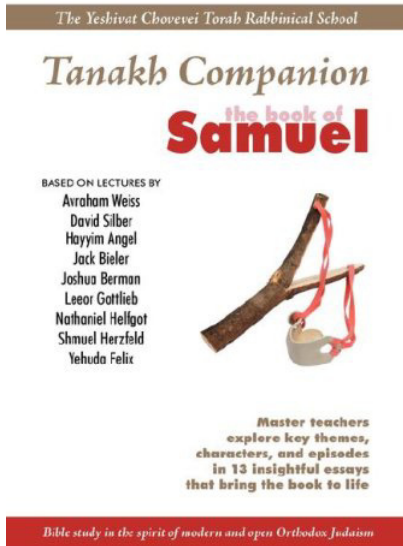


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Helfgot, Nathaniel, ed.

The Tanakh Companion to the Book of Samuel

The Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School

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The Tanakh Companion to the Book of Samuel is a selection of lectures on the book of Samuel presented at a series of “study days” at New York City’s Yeshivat Chovevei Torah (YCT), the open Orthodox Rabbinical School. An introduction (vii–x) explains the background and nature of these programs and the lectures given there. These study days are modeled after those at the Yaacov Herzog Teachers Institute, affiliated with the Yeshivat Har Eztion in Alon Shvut, Israel, which began holding these study days in the early 1990s, originally led by Rabbi Yoel Bin Nun (vii). These study days evolved into an annual lectureship and was connected with the launching of *Megadim*, a journal of Modern Orthodox Tanakh scholarship. The model of the study days was imported to the United States by the YCT in 2002 (vii), and the volume under review was published “to give the general public a taste of the outstanding classes and beautiful and profound Torah learning that take place during the event” (viii). *The Tanakh Companion to the Book of Samuel* is comprised of “lightly edited transcripts” of the oral presentations made on the book of Samuel during the last three years. It is noted that, “as such, the essays should be read in that light, not as full-blown academic treatments of the topics at hand. Rather, these are popular presentations of profound and sophisticated ideas that help us appreciate and understand this fascinating book of the Bible (viii). The chapters reflect this oral character, and footnotes and scholarly apparatus have intentionally been kept at

a minimum. With a view to making the book as accessible to readers as possible, large portions of the text—both in Hebrew and in English—are printed within each of the thirteen chapters. The methodology followed in the book is referred to as “the literary-theological method,” which “makes systematic use of all the literary tools and methods that have come to the fore in the last hundred years while maintaining a firm control of all the classical exegetical literature” (ix). While the study engages the text directly, it also builds upon the insights of midrash and classical exegesis, with the goal of “apprehending the plain sense of the text” (ix). The editor explains that “this type of study makes consistent use of techniques such as: close reading, patterning, intertextuality and self-reference in the text, literary echoes, enveloping, development of character, word-plays, parallelism and chiasmic structure, plot development and a whole host of other literary tools that can be brought to bear on the text of the *Tanakh*” (ix).

The book consists of the following essays: David Silber, “The Birth of Samuel and the Birth of Kingship” (1 Sam 1:1–2:10; pp. 1–22); Yehuda Felix, “Hannah, the Mother of Prayer” (1 Sam 1:1–2:10; pp. 25–34); David Silber, “Anarchy and Monarchy, Part One: Samuel the Prophet King” (1 Sam 8:13; pp. 37–54); Leeor Gottlieb, “The Nachash Story and the Dead Sea Scrolls” (1 Sam 11; pp. 57–77); Nathaniel Helfgot, “Amalek: Ethics, Values and Halakhic Development” (1 Sam 15; pp. 79–94); Nathaniel Helfgot, “David and Saul: A Comparison” (1 Sam 15–17; pp. 97–121); Hayyim Angel, “The Theological Significance of the Urim Ve-Tummim” (123–40); Hayyim Angel, “Why David Did Not Kill Saul: Insights from Psalms” (143–59); Avraham Weiss, “Avigayil: Savior of David” (1 Sam 25; pp. 161–85); Jack Bieler, “Uzzah and the Ark” (2 Sam 6; pp. 187–204); Joshua Berman, “David’s Request to Build the Temple” (2 Sam 7; pp. 207–24); Shmuel Herzfeld, “David and Batsheva: Echoes of Saul and the Gift of Forgiveness” (2 Sam 11–12; pp. 227–52); David Silber, “Anarchy and the Monarchy, Part Two” (2 Sam 21–24; pp. 255–56).

The first three chapters concern the transition from the period of the judges to that of the monarchy. All these chapters focus, to one degree or another, on the story of Hannah (1 Sam 1:1–2:10), which is read on Rosh Hashanah. In the first chapter, Silber contrasts Hannah with matriarchs who went before her and portrays her as something of a hero who “has to take matters into her own hands and approach God personally” (15). After exploring the prayer spoken by Hannah, Silber draws the following conclusions:

It appears that the story of Hannah is not simply about a woman who wants to have a child. Actually, Hannah wants something else.

As I see it, what Hannah really wants is to change the world.

Her prayer is the clue. It is not a prayer for a baby; it is about something very different. Hannah’s message is that God is the true King. God’s will is that the

powerful and the haughty should not oppress those who are impoverished and weak. People graced with power should not abuse it.

Hannah prays for a kingdom on earth which reflects the heavenly kingdom. What Hannah is calling for is explicit in the reference to *malko*, to God's king. It is actually a request for kingship—one that reflects the true kingship of God.

This is why we read this on Rosh Hashanah. The basic theme of Rosh Hashanah is God's kingship. The *haftarah* reminds us that our job here on earth is to reflect the kingship of heaven on earth. (18)

In the next chapter Felix explores Hannah as the mother of prayer. He notes that the rules for how Orthodox Jews comport themselves during the *Shemoneh Esrei*—"standing with legs together, being silent, but with moving lips"—is learned from Hannah's behavior (31). However, Hannah not only "showed us the laws of prayer," but she also "illustrates its importance, modeling what prayer can accomplish" (32). He concludes that the story of Hannah is read on Rosh Hashanah because the very essence of the holiday has to do with prayer, of which she is the mother. In the third chapter, Silber is concerned with the monarchy as an institution. He compares Samuel's attitude toward it with that of Hannah and notes that, whereas Samuel saw the people's desire for the monarchy as an effort to replace God, "Hannah ... doesn't see the king as replacing God. She sees the king as reflecting God. [Consequently,] Hannah prays for kingship" (50).

Subsequent chapters deal with an assortment of passages from Samuel and vary in the degree to which these concerns are either more academic or more midrashic in nature. Gottlieb uses the story of Nachash (1 Sam 11) "as an example of the complexities and the problems that may arise in our understanding of the textual tradition of the Bible" (57). In his exploration of the story, he examines parts of it by utilizing the perspective of the Septuagint, Josephus, and the Dead Sea Scrolls. In the fifth chapter, Helfgot grapples with the directive to destroy the tribe of Amalek and the extent of its applicability. He engages this question through a close reading of the text but also through a fascinating rehearsal of two varying rabbinic views, one of the *Sefer Ha-Chinukh* and the other of Maimonides. Helfgot's comparison of David and Saul in chapter 6 concludes that, to some extent, the two are mirror images, and that "David makes all the same mistakes that Saul does" (119). Angel's exploration of the theological significance of the Urim and the Thummim in chapter 7 uses these items of priestly equipment to segue into an exploration of the divine-human continuum in ancient Israel. Chapters 8, 9, 11, and 12 all explore stories about David, drawing out both his positive attributes as well as his shortcomings. In the midst of these, chapter 10 explores the mysterious incident of Uzzah's death in connection with the ark. The final chapter, by Silber, looks at the closing chapters of Samuel and concludes that they form a kind of *inclusio* with the beginning chapters. He concludes:

The Book of Samuel begins with the destruction of Shiloh and the capture of the Ark by the Philistines. The book now ends with God being restored to God's place. Saul may not accomplish this task: He never figures out what is required from him as king. Initially, it can't be David either, until he internalizes his mission to serve God.

In the last chapter, David is the one who installs the Ark in its permanent place.... In other words, the Ark has returned, God has found God's place, and this coincides with David being chosen eternally.

The lesson of the chiasm at the end of the Book of Samuel is that, in an ideal world, kingship can work. The Ark can find its place, and the king and God can live together. But this can only happen if the king understands one thing: Israel's king is chosen by God to serve him faithfully (p. 265).

As Helfgot stresses in the introduction, this volume is not intended to be either a systematic or a comprehensive introduction to the books of Samuel. Occasionally, however, interesting bits of information crop up in the writers' discussions of their respective passages. For example, in the second chapter, Felix notes that the book of 1 Samuel begins with the letter *vav* and asks, "Why begin a book with the conjunction 'and'? This beginning highlights the connection (and the contrast) between Judges and Samuel" (27). He also notes that the fifteenth-century commentator Isaac Abrabanel suggested that "Samuel may in fact not chronologically belong at the end of this dark period [of the judges]. He states that the two terrible stories [at the end of the book of Judges] could have taken place any time at all during the period of Judges" (26). Many of these kinds of incidental remarks may incite some readers to further research.

The popular nature of the book does make for accessibility. Many of the discussions offer profound spiritual insights into the book of Samuel, and both rabbis and Christian clergy may find herein plenty of grist for the expository mill. However, for readers who might like to further pursue issues such as that in the preceding paragraph, as well as explore ideas the writers have attributed to such luminaries as Abrabanel, Maimonides, Rashi, and others, the lack of citations may be frustrating. A glossary of terms, authors, and rabbinic sources might have served to make the book more accessible to non-Orthodox readers, and a selected bibliography could have helped readers further explore the ideas presented in each of the chapters. These shortcomings aside, *The Tanakh Companion to the Book of Samuel* will be of great interest to those studying Samuel from within Orthodox Judaism, as well as to students of Samuel who have an interest in the rich interpretive traditions of Orthodox Judaism.