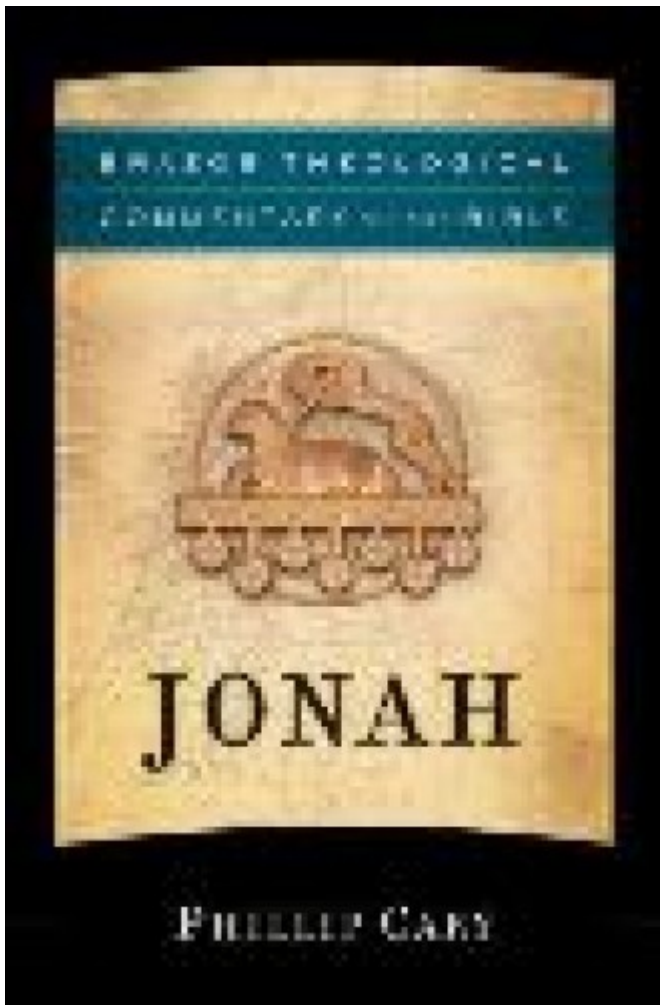


Jonah (Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible)

reviewed by [Barbara Green](#) in the [February 24, 2009](#) issue

In Review



Jonah (Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible)

Phillip Cary

Brazos

The preface to the Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible offers two analogies related to the interpretation of scripture. It likens scripture first to a mosaic that arrives disassembled and must be put together without directions (Irenaeus), and second to a series of locked rooms whose scrambled keys one must sort to open the doors and access the rooms (Origen). Readers may be left with the impression that there is a single correct solution and that other proposed solutions do not qualify. The principles necessary for a coherent (proper, unified) interpretation, according to the preface, are contained in apostolic doctrine, specifically the Nicene tradition—the editors’ succinct summary of which includes no reference to anything outside of God’s actions in regard to Jesus.

The series editors contend that modern methods of reading (exemplified by the work of 19th-century theologian Benjamin Jowett) are misleading because they eschew doctrine while claiming objectivity. Without citing specific scholars, the editors fault postmodern thought for hypercriticism and for an overreliance on interpretive frameworks. The struggle to know God and to interpret scripture is difficult, they contend, but doctrine clarifies rather than obscures, helps rather than hinders.

Hence the commentaries in this series are theological rather than exegetical, and they are produced by theologians rather than biblical exegetes. Though the editors stress that there is no particular limit on how Nicene doctrine is to be approached, the Nicene perspective necessarily limits the scope of the series authors’ inquiry: they fail to acknowledge that Nicene tradition is susceptible to historical and ideological blindness, and they seem to view postmodern exegesis and interpretation as inevitably in opposition to theology.

Phillip Cary’s commentary cannot be read apart from the series editors’ prefatory note, since its strengths and weaknesses are bound up with the aims of the series. The commentary’s strength is that it provides historical, literary-linguistic and theological information, suitably organized around the four chapters of the biblical book, with verse-by-verse, sometimes phrase-by-phrase explanations. Cary names the book of Jonah’s setting (eighth century) and its likely time of production (post-sixth century). His tone is reader-friendly and nontechnical, and he provides masses of cross-references to assist recall of other biblical texts that may have bearing on the Jonah material. The long interpretive tradition on the book of Jonah (Jewish and Christian, ancient and modern) is well represented, though anonymously and without reference to any other specific work on Jonah (save that of Phyllis

Trible).

The main problems of the commentary are related to three cardinal choices that Cary made. First, Cary opted to make Jonah negative. Jonah is “a ridiculous excuse for a prophet, . . . a screw up”; he is “an unreliable character”; he prays tardily and by cliché; he is “trying to pull a fast one.” Jonah is a “prophet posing as bureaucrat,” characterized by “malfeasance” and “hateful defiance”; he looks “like a fool” and is “beside himself with fury.” These claims seem exaggerated, one-sided. Constructing Jonah as a negative pole has its functions, such as challenging a tendency toward smugness, but Cary fails to point out that this characterization is not inevitable, and it sets the tone for the whole interpretation. He does not adequately discuss how this Jonah can be reconciled with the Jonah who is a type for Jesus.

Second, Cary’s claims about God are problematic. On the one hand, God is benevolent, ultimate Good; on the other hand, God is destructive and acts as an enemy. How do these two sets of characteristics go together? The Nicene tradition does not excuse us from attempting to correlate some of this problematic language, to weigh in on issues of divine agency and violence. Without saying it bluntly, Cary seems to favor a heavily interventionist Deity whose creatures bumble unknowingly toward the good, act well only by mistake and succeed only thanks to God’s vast grace. A case can be made for such a God, but this pessimistic anthropology and theology is a commentator’s construction and not necessarily a reading that arises readily from the text.

Finally, Cary makes the last verse of Jonah key to the whole book and claims that it highlights the relationship between Jews and gentiles. This material, presented in an epilogue, is not easy to follow, and I may have misunderstood it. Cary suggests that the final question God poses to Jonah, “Should I not pity . . . ?” (4:11), is posed to both Jews and Christians, in each case about their opponent. Can you, God asks Jonah, pity the ones whom God has allowed to survive alongside you: Jews still remain God’s people, and Christians thrive under that descriptor as well. Can Jews accept their destiny to be a blessing to all people, and can gentile Christians tolerate the survival of Jews—in both cases for their own benefit as well as that of their opponents?

Is this really the best, or even a good, optic for understanding the book, or is it a product of the “unashamedly dogmatic” approach of the Brazos series? Christians have long tended to agree that Jonah is about Jews and gentiles, but Jews, who produced it, generally construe it as being about them and God. Throughout the

commentary Cary instructs Christians to avoid various ways of disrespecting Judaism, whether by patronizing Jews since they missed a major cue or by disdainning them because Christians supposedly would not make their foolish choices, but the book features Jesus on virtually every page. The constant skittering from Jonah to Jesus seems to me to be disrespectful of the tradition from which Jonah emerges. If a writer from another tradition were to do with the New Testament what Cary does with the Old, I think Christians would find it a problem, especially if the writer impugned their own status before God, even in a cordial way.