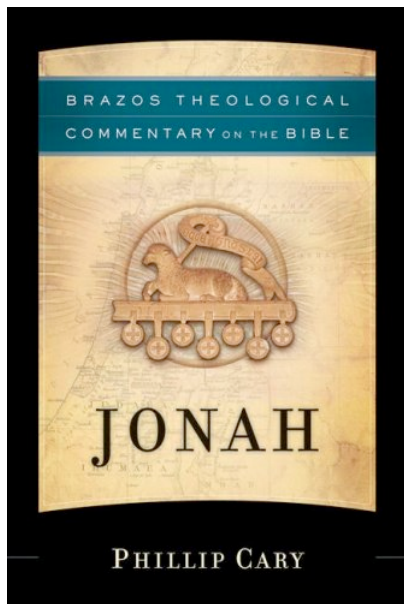


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Cary, Philip

Jonah

Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible

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Philip Cary's commentary on the book of Jonah combines profound exegesis with original insights that could serve both the biblical scholar and the layperson. This follows the overall vision of the Brazos commentaries, as R. R. Reno puts it in the series preface: "the commentators in this series have not been chosen because of their historical or philosophical experience.... they are not biblical scholars in the conventional ... sense.... Instead, the commentators were chosen because of their knowledge of and expertise in using the Christian doctrinal tradition. They are qualified by virtue of the doctrinal formation of their mental habits" (12).

The commentary provides a detailed analysis of each verse, which is indicated both in the text itself and at the top of each page for easier reference. Cary utilizes his own modified combination of the King James Version, Revised Standard Version, New American Standard Version, and the English Standard Version. At the end of the commentary is an epilogue (163–74) with some observations which could be useful for a dialogue between Judaism and Christianity. This is followed by both subject (175–80) and scripture (181–87) indices.

Cary's approach is synchronic, which means that he investigates the text as a whole, in its final form. As an exegetical tool, he uses typology for the most part. He views the book of Jonah as a parable about a northern prophet, written for the returning exiles from Babylon.

In addition to information that one may find in other commentaries, Cary has some fresh observations. For instance, commenting on Jonah 1, he notes that Josephus identified Tarshish with Tarsus, which allows for an interesting parallel with Paul of Tarsus and his mission to the Gentiles (41). Among some of the other original exegetical connections that Cary makes, there is a reference to the sailors who throw the cargo into the sea (1:5). Cary notes that reducing or lightening the ship's weight could have qualitative (not just quantitative) implications, just as in Genesis (16:4) the same word ("lighten") is used to indicate that Sarah's barrenness made her appear as a "light thing" in the eyes of Hagar, who therefore despised her mistress (50).

Cary's numerous allusions to the psalms are insightful. He also provides helpful background information about ancient practices such as the function of lots (55). Cary points to interesting connections with Judaic practices in the Old Testament, as in the case of the lots required by God for the purpose of selecting a scapegoat on the Day of Atonement. The analysis of this practice in reference to both Jesus and Jonah as part of a broader Old Testament typology is thorough (56–57). The reference to Saint Augustine's typology is enlightening, as in the image of the ship that could constitute a foreshadowing of the wood of the cross on which the spiritual future of humanity was decided (71).

Cary examines the notion of prayer in light of Jonah 2 and looks at various implications for prayer in general (83–92). Some of his comments are thought provoking: "there is no voice at the heart of the sea.... Jonah must be praying in silence.... it is perhaps the only silent prayer in the whole Bible" (86). He concludes that "the essential issue of all biblical prayer ... is a call to the Lord out of misery and helplessness and a plea for undeserved mercy" (101).

Discussing Jonah 3, Cary sees the faith of the Ninevites as an echo of the faith of Abraham (110). Unlike most commentators, who only look at the Jonah/Elijah parallels, he also notes the parallel behaviors of the king of Nineveh and Job. Cary provides a religious and philosophical discussion on whether God changed his mind as a result of people's activities. He concludes that, while divine mercy is unchanging, it takes into consideration the possibility that humanity can repent (124).

Analyzing Jonah 4, Cary points to some problematic issues, such as the historical, eventual destruction of Nineveh in spite of its repentance (128). He notes such details as the

difference between Exod 34:6–7 and Jonah’s reference to this passage in 4:2, which omits the word “truth,” thus revealing Jonah’s conviction that “the Lord has not been true to his word” (133). There is also the parallel imagery between the departure of Jonah from Nineveh in 4:5 and the departure of Israel from Egypt in Exod 12:41, both of which are referred to by the same Hebrew verb (138–39). For Cary, the anger of Jonah is the anger of Judah over the fading of its messianic hopes (154). He sees in the destruction of the gourd a foreshadowing of Jesus’ death on the cross (147–48). Cary suggests that the sparing of Nineveh’s people and cattle brings to mind the Sabbath rest that is experienced by creation, as it is finally freed from vanity and evil (161). In the epilogue he recognizes, after St. Paul, that Israel remains God’s chosen people and therefore has its own rightful place in the plan of salvation (172).

As noted, Cary considers the book of Jonah to be a postexilic work addressed to the returning exiles from Babylon. He bases his conviction on the past-tense reference to Nineveh in Jonah 3:3 (35). It is questionable, though, whether the past tense in biblical narratives is an indication that something no longer existed in the time of composition (cf. Gen 29:17; Num 14:24). In other words, Nineveh could have existed when the book of Jonah was being composed. Similarly, Cary’s reference to the term “God of Heaven” (Jonah 1:9) as exilic or postexilic (59) is also questionable, since it already appears in the Genesis (24:3, 7) and in the Psalms (136:26).

At times Cary’s inferences from the Hebrew original seem difficult to accept. He notes, for instance, that “in Nineveh Jonah had asked the Lord to take his soul away (4:3); now he asks his soul to do it. Poor soul! Souls can’t quite do that kind of a thing, for God created them to live” (151). Cary is making this observation on the basis of the literal translation of the Hebrew: “[Jonah] asked his soul to die” (4:8). This, however, is a Hebrew idiom that ought not be translated literally. Jonah is not asking his *soul* to take his life away; he is actually asking the *Lord* to take his life away.

Cary states that “Jonah is an unreliable character and we cannot trust his account of things” (40). He also refers to Jonah as a “disobedient fool” (40), an “idiot sleeping at the bottom of the boat” (54), and a “screwup” (64). He adds that Jonah represents an anti-Elijah, anti-Job, and anti-Abraham figure, in so far as he does not want Nineveh to be spared (137). One may wonder, however, whether such references to Jonah are appropriate. After all, Jonah is one of the twelve Hebrew Minor Prophets, and a prophetic biblical book is named after him. Moreover, Cary concludes that Jonah is unreliable because he never mentions Israel (130), but the fact is that neither Habakkuk nor Haggai mention Israel. Actually, Habakkuk does not even mention Judah, even though he is a southern prophet. Obadiah, a southern prophet, mentions Judah only once and Israel only once. Does that mean that all these prophets are unreliable?

In the epilogue, Cary states: “We have insisted that [Christians]—not the Jews—are the people of God now” (165). He compares this attitude with the attitude of Jonah toward the Ninevites and points out that this is also the attitude of the older brother toward the younger one in Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son (170). But would it not be more accurate to say that it is the older son in the parable who represents Israel? After all, the Jews are first in the covenantal order, not only theologically but also chronologically. Christianity grew out of Judaism, not the other way around. Besides, Cary does not say anything about the rejection of Jesus by many of his fellow Israelites, nor does he make a distinction between Old Testament and rabbinic Judaism—which would have been helpful to the discussion on the role of Judaism with respect to Christianity. Nevertheless, Cary does end on a hopeful note in helping us rediscover that Christians and Jews can rejoice in the graces that they have both received from God. It is a hermeneutical conclusion that brings to an end this thought-provoking commentary. While it does not include a bibliography, it still constitutes a fine contribution to the field of exegesis on the book of Jonah. Philip Cary does not simply repeat what others have written. He opens the way to some new possibilities in the interpretation of the book of Jonah for Christians today.