

[MJTM 15 (2013–2014)]

BOOK REVIEW

Kevin J. Youngblood. *Jonah: God's Scandalous Mercy*. Hearing the Message of Scripture: A Commentary on the Old Testament. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013. 186 pp. Hbk. ISBN: 9780310282990.

Zondervan has done pastors and teachers everywhere a great service by providing the Hearing the Message of Scripture commentary series. In contrast to many commentaries that treat the text of the Bible in a verse-by-verse or even word-by-word format (leading to more of the same in evangelical preaching and exposition), this series deliberately emphasizes large-scale structure and the rhetorical style of the biblical authors. As the series introduction states, “Rather than focusing on words or phrases, contributors to this series will concentrate on the flow of thought in the biblical writings, both at the macroscopic level of entire compositions and the microscopic level of individual text units” (10). Of particular interest to academicians is the series’ adoption of discourse analysis and text linguistics as tools to underlie the clausal hierarchy and structure of the text; those familiar with such methodologies have likely long desired to see them employed in a commentary format aimed at non-specialists.

Kevin J. Youngblood begins by providing nearly three and a half pages of bibliographic references, assisting the interested reader to locate further sources if necessary. He quickly orients his audience to Jonah’s oft-debated place within the Book of the Twelve by noting how it serves to address two questions that preoccupied these prophets: “(1) How do divine mercy and divine justice interact without canceling each other out? (2) How do God’s universal sovereignty and his particular covenant with Israel interact without canceling each other out?” (28). Youngblood also displays a level of hermeneutical sophistication that

cannot be taken for granted in many popular commentaries when he carefully expounds the backgrounds of both the events described in the book and the likely circumstances of its later composition. Additionally, his discourse analysis methodology and criteria for structure indicated in different Hebrew forms is clearly laid out (in particular, Longacre's work is relied upon), a fact sure to be appreciated by Old Testament students. While he does not give a definition of "rhetoric" or situate his project within the broader world of rhetorical criticism of biblical literature, Youngblood does provide a list of six recurring "devices" used to deliver the message of the book: "parallelism, alternating scenes, verbal repetition, symbolic use of geography and climate, intertextuality, and textual information gaps" (38).

Within the body of the commentary itself, each section of text is introduced with a brief summary statement of the "main idea" as a whole, followed by the "literary context" of the passage, the translation with an outline, notes on the structure and literary form, and of course the explanation itself. Some of these features deserve further comment. The translations are some of the most helpful available in commentaries today. Each clause in the Hebrew is rendered on a separate line, with a rigorous system of indenting and shading representing such features in the text as "off-line" comments or lower levels of discussion, in addition to speech being noted. This graphical presentation of the text allows a reader to easily grasp the main flow of the narrative, with pauses for expansion or description clearly marked, allowing certain features of Hebrew grammar not easily rendered in idiomatic English (such as the distinction between *wayyiqtol* and *qatal* verbs) to shine through. In explicating the structure and literary form of a given passage, excellent use is made of charts and tables to display similarities and differences between different formulas of speech in the Old Testament. Readers will also doubtless notice the considerable yet never overbearing interaction with secondary sources, including the best in current lexical and grammatical sources.

One area in which this commentary shines is in the identification and analysis of conceptual and wording similarities between Jonah and earlier Old Testament books. While many commen-

taries unhelpfully supply their readers with mere lists of parallels that amount to little more than data dumping, Youngblood takes the time to reflect on the purpose of the continuities and discontinuities between the two contexts in which a phrase or narrative motif occurs. A good example is found in his handling of the parallels between Elijah's conversation with God in 1 Kgs 19:3–11 and Jonah's divine interview in Jonah 4:5–11. These stories share a common pattern of the protagonist fleeing to the desert, sitting under a plant, requesting to die, being given one question twice by God, then being communicated to by nature. However, a significant difference emerges when one considers that Elijah was upset due to a people's lack of repentance, whereas Jonah was angry due to the Ninevites' repentance. Also, the stories end differently. Similarly insightful connections are drawn throughout the commentary.

A final feature of *Jonah* that deserves special notice are the words on "Canonical and Practical Significance" found at the end of each section of text. These serve to discuss how the theological themes of Jonah are developed elsewhere in Scripture. For example, the section following the exposition of Jonah's prayer in ch. 2 contains subheadings covering, "The Sign of Jonah and the Centrality of the Resurrection," "The Exodus Motif and Jonah's Calling," "YHWH's Sovereignty in Salvation," "The Humbling Nature of Salvation," and "Piety and Repentance."

In conclusion, *Jonah* is an excellent resource that will be of great benefit to any pastor or student who desires to better understand the thought flow and message of the book. One can only hope that this commentary, and others like it, will serve to inspire a new revival of "big-picture" preaching as well as careful literary analysis of the text.

David J. Fuller
McMaster Divinity College
Hamilton, ON