

# A Social-Scientific Analysis of the Representation of Jonah and the Self-Perception of the Yehudite Literati during the Late Persian Period

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## Abstract

This article addresses the question of what can be gleaned from the book of Jonah regarding the self-perception of its author(ship) and intended audience through a social-scientific analysis. What does the analysis of Jonah's representation reflect of the self-perception of the Yehudite literati during or after the period in which the book was written? Firstly, an overview is given of what is known about the authorship of the book of Jonah and how the author(s) is related to the main character. This is followed by an overview of the values of honour and shame, and an application of how Jonah is represented in this regard. This analysis is then related to the self-perception of the author(ship) and audience for whom the book was written, due to their association with the main character.

**Keywords:** social-scientific analysis; Yehud; literati; late Persian period; author; Jonah

## Introduction

Over the past four decades the usefulness of the social-scientific approach for biblical studies has been proven over and over again. “Social-scientific criticism of the Bible is that phase of the exegetical task which analyses the social and cultural dimensions of the text and of its environmental context through the utilisation of the perspectives, theory, models, and research of the social sciences” (Elliott 1993, 7). It is therefore a sub-discipline in the exegetical process and should always be used as part of a larger exegetical endeavour.<sup>1</sup>

Social-scientific criticism approaches biblical texts as if they are “meaningful configurations of language” that have, as their intention, to communicate an implicit or explicit message between the composer(s) and audience (Elliot 1993, 7, 8). A text is therefore a vehicle of social interaction. “The text can be understood, even explained, as a product of economic, social, political and religious factors and processes that ultimately reflected the interests of specific groups in the society of that time” (Jonker and Arendse 2005, 48).

It then stands to reason that if the book of Jonah was meant as “an edifying tale for the contemporaries of its composition” that “there is a possibility of reconstructing something of the social world into which it was born” (Handy 2007, 5). Someone within a specific social world wrote the book of Jonah. This world would have been intelligible to those who shared it (Handy 2007, 11; cf. Ben Zvi 2003, 4–5).

In this article, the book of Jonah is thought to date from the late Persian Period, somewhere during the 5th or early 4th century B.C.E., and that it was written for the community in Yehud (cf. Handy 2007, 5, 6; Ben Zvi 2003, 7–8). During this time, Judah (Yehud) had a “definable identity,” the area was at peace, the Persian Empire could be compared to or regarded as the continuation of the Assyrian empire, and the book acquired authority (Handy 2007, 6–7). A chronological distance is suggested by the legendary way in which Nineveh is presented, the book functions as a parody of prophecy, and presumes that the audience is familiar with the messages of the biblical prophets (Bridge 2009, 116–17).

The question this article addresses is what can be gleaned from the book of Jonah about the self-perception of its author(s) and intended audience through a social-scientific analysis. Firstly, an overview will be given of what we know about the authorship of the book of Jonah and how the author(s) is related to the main character. This is followed by an overview of the values of honour and shame, and an application of how Jonah is represented in this regard. This analysis will then be related to the self-perception of the

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1 The analysis in this article is based on a literary-exegetical analysis (see Schäder 2016).

author(ship) and audience (the Yehudite literati), for whom the book was written, due to their association with the main character.

This article builds on the work of Ehud Ben Zvi (2003) and Lowell K. Handy (2007). Their work forms the point of departure for this study.

## The Author(s) of the Book of Jonah

The author of the book of Jonah was in all likelihood a male scribe.<sup>2</sup> As the book is considered to provide legitimate knowledge about Yahweh and his ways—due to its canonisation—the author must also have been considered as “authoritative” (Ben Zvi 2003, 4). The work was likely intended for those who could read and write themselves, namely the Yehudite literati,<sup>3</sup> the author’s peers (Handy 2007, 5, 6, 13, 125; cf. Ben Zvi 2003:6).<sup>4</sup> Their “religion was that of the Jerusalem temple cult, their professional identity would have been that of the royal court before the Persian Empire and as part and parcel of the Persian administration during the Persian Empire” (Handy 2007, 15).<sup>5</sup>

Amongst the scribal class, those who composed original literary compositions were a small minority as “original authorship must have been a sideline for scribes engaged in other occupations.”<sup>6</sup> It also stands to reason that formal scribal training in Yehud must have been concentrated in the regional capital of Jerusalem. Basic scribal training would have taken several years, whereafter they would have specialised in what was becoming the biblical canon during the Persian Period (Handy 2007, 14).

We can assert, then, that the book of Jonah was written by a male scribe (or scribes) who trained in Jerusalem, was primarily responsible for writing anything but short

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2 According to Handy (2007, 12) the biblical material has no available oral predecessors and it is the product of scribal activity. The book of Jonah also reflects primarily male spheres of activity. Most scribes in the ancient Near East were men (Handy 2007, 14).

3 Ben Zvi (2003) refers to this group as the “Jerusalemite literati.”

4 The majority of the general populace of ancient Judah was illiterate, and from its foundation through to the Hellenistic Period primarily agrarian (Handy 2007, 12). It stands to reason that scribal training was exclusive to elite families (Handy 2007, 15).

5 “With local identity allowed, even encouraged, under Persian control, the loyalties of the Jerusalem scribes need not have been so much ‘divided’ as ‘dual’ with a professional pride in being both Judean, with its long history, and in being part of the administration of the great world empire of the Persians” (Handy 2007, 15).

6 According to Handy (2007, 12–13), “most scribal activity was restricted to court or cultic tabulation, with some, probably, engaged in business dealings. In the larger courts of the ancient Near East scribes served as advisors to the kings, secretaries for writing messages to be sent by others, for tabulating income and expense, recording royal patronage, legal material, religious practice, and divination manuals as well as recording sacrifices presented and economic transactions.”

stories, and penned this work for the Yehudite literati who had a similar background to the scribe(s) and, like them, had a vast biblical knowledge (Handy 2007, 13).

“Jonah reflects both a Judean theology and an imperial polity” (Handy 2007, 15). For the author and his audience, the only proper temple to worship at was that in Jerusalem (Handy 2007, 7, 23). The scribes would have been deemed as an extension of the governmental elite’s position (Handy 2007, 19). They would have considered the scribes as “necessary, annoying, and familial. The first group would reflect a business relationship, the second an elitist social distain, and the third cultural social life” (Handy 2007, 19).

In turn, the figure of Jonah displays a number of attributes that appear to align him with the scribal class (Handy 2007, 18–19):

- (1) He had freedom of movement from the Mediterranean Sea to Nineveh and functioned as a mediator or intermediary between God and the King of Nineveh (also unintentionally with the sailors and nature).<sup>7</sup>
- (2) He appears to be wealthy or at least had the means to make a sea voyage on short notice.
- (3) He reflects a learned theology in that he could deliver a well-constructed hymn on a whim. He is “quite familiar with the Jerusalem cultic establishment and knows the language of cultic liturgy” (Handy 2007, 65). It appears that the book of Jonah—and as a result its author—was keenly familiar with and had knowledge of other texts in the Hebrew Bible (cf. Bewer 1971, 12).<sup>8</sup>

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7 It needs to be pointed out that in the book of Jonah Yahweh assumes a position of “tremendous power, expects obedience, but allows a certain amount of leeway on the part of subordinates as long as commands are eventually carried out, and has a greater concern for those higher in the social and political statuses than for those persons on the lowest levels of society” (Handy 2007, 55). These would have been aspects associated with governors and imperial kings by the scribes. God then takes the attributes of human rulers in the book of Jonah (cf. Handy 2007, 55). Nineveh, in turn, as the capital city of ancient Assyria, stood for the political centre of control over the Israelite Jonah, probably representing Persian control over Judah when the story was written (Handy 2007, 123). “[T]his makes the Ninevites not total foreigners, but the rulers of the protagonist of the story and, by literary parallel, the leaders of the author of the book. The story acknowledges the human political authority of the non-Israelite (Judean) empire, but insists that it is but a step in a much higher hierarchy under the control and moral jurisdiction of Yahweh, the God of Judah” (Handy 2007, 123).

8 Scholars (see, for example, Magonet 1976, 65–112; Dozeman 1989; Ego 2003; Schultz 2003; Zappf 2003; Spronk 2009; Wöhrle 2009; Yates 2014, and others) tend to discuss the commonalities between the book of Jonah and the following texts/books, or quotations, namely Genesis 6–9 (the flood narrative), Genesis 19 (on the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah); Exodus 32–34 (specifically the *Gnadenformel* in Exodus 34:6–7 and Numbers 14:18; see also Joel 2:3; Psalms 86:15; 145:8), 1 Kings 17–2 Kings 9 (the Elijah and Elisha narratives), 2 Kings 14:23–29, the Psalms, Ezra and Nehemiah, Job, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel 27, Joel, Obadiah, Micah, Nahum, and the book of the Twelve Minor Prophets in general. This implies that these texts—albeit in some form or another—already existed by or during the time that the book of Jonah was penned. Only a detailed investigation of the intertextual relations between the book of Jonah and other texts from the Hebrew Bible will determine whether

- (4) His knowledge of the sea and of the city of Nineveh indicates that the book of Jonah is urban and that the Jonah figure/scribe had an education of the wider world. Nineveh, Tarshish, Joppa, and the temple of Jerusalem are all well-known centres of some importance to the elite in Jerusalem (Handy 2007, 118; cf. Ben Zvi 2003, 108–109).

What Jonah and the Yehudite literati appear to have had in common was that they were both mediators or intermediaries between God and humans, or the Persian elite and commoners. They were both considered to be wealthy, to have a learned theology/education, and to have a knowledge of sacred texts.

## The Ancient Values of Honour and Shame

The core values in the ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern area were honour and shame. An overview of what is meant by honour and shame follows.

### Honour

Honour is a claim to worth that is publicly acknowledged. To “be honoured” is to have such worth ascribed to one or to be acclaimed for it (Jonker and Arendse 2005, 53; Van Eck 1995, 165). “Honour is the value of a person in their own eyes (that is, one’s claim to worth) *plus* that person’s value in the eyes of his own social group” (Van Eck 1995, 165). Honour can be either ascribed or acquired.

Ascribed honour is the “socially recognized claim to worth which befalls a person, that happens passively” (Van Eck 1995, 165–66; Stansell 2006, 95). An example of ascribed honour is when one inherits it (Stansell 2006, 95; cf. Jonker and Arendse 2005, 53), for example, when a son enjoys the honour of his father’s name or in his membership of a specific clan, hence the association of “the son of so-and-so.” Honorific titles or names could also be bestowed on one, such as “Rabbi,” “Prophet,” or even “Christ” (Neyrey 1994, 116).<sup>9</sup>

Acquired honour is “the socially recognized claim to worth that a person acquires by excelling over others in the social interaction that is challenge and response” (Van Eck 1995, 166; cf. Stansell 2006, 95; Jonker and Arendse 2005, 53).<sup>10</sup> Honour, which is

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“Jonah refers to these other texts in a way which either recasts them ironically, subverts or otherwise reinterprets their meaning, or calls them into question” (Bolin 1997, 184). The case can also be made that Jonah influenced other biblical texts instead of them influencing it (cf. Bolin 1997, 184).

9 This explains the importance of genealogies within the Bible that “help to affirm the honourable status of a person which is inherited from their honoured ancestors” (Jonker and Arendse 2005, 53).

10 “Challenge and response” is a “game” in which persons challenge each other according to socially accepted rules in order to gain honour over the other. This is done because honour is a limited good. For one party to acquire honour implies that the other had to lose it (Van Eck 1995, 166; cf. Esler 2006, 193). Such challenges and responses must occur in the public domain, where the success or failure of

primarily a group value, must be maintained and defended and males must achieve honour in such public contests (Plevnik 1998, 107; cf. Stansell 2006, 95; Van Eck 1995, 166).

The righteous person's honour is the result of their relationship with God and their trust in God's help (see Psalms 54 and 55). Any calamity then allows enemies to deride, hate or make a mockery of God's concern. The sufferer must then demonstrate the opposite by (a) insisting on his righteousness, (b) confessing their guilt to God, and (c) by appealing to God's steadfast love. The punishment of one's enemies by God also reflects one's honour due to a special relationship with him (see Psalm 35:4; 69; 70:2; 71:13; 83:16–17) (Plevnik 1998, 108–109). The prophets often mention disobedience as a reason for God's rejection (cf. Psalm 44; 69; 109:28–29), as well as reliance on the wrong allies (Plevnik 1998, 109). It is then a fear of God, which usually goes along with obedience to the Torah, that gives one a claim to honour, whereas a transgression of it—such as disregarding God—makes one shameful.

Honour also has “a strong material orientation” as one's honour is expressed by the measure of one's possessions or display of wealth (Neyrey 1994, 116). However, when a person achieved honour, it was at the expense of others, as honour is a limited good (Neyrey 1994, 117). Certain public roles and offices were also considered more honourable than others. Fathers' honour was sanctioned in the Ten Commandments. “Most notably, honor was attached to offices such as king and high priest, as well as governor, proconsul, and other civic or imperial offices” (Neyrey 1994, 116).

The model of honour and shame can also be applied to larger social wholes, such as nations, and not just individuals and families (Chance 1994, 144).

## Shame

Shame, as the opposite of honour, is a claim to worth that is publicly denied and repudiated. To “be shamed” (i.e., being ashamed) is always negative; it means to be denied or to be diminished in honour. However, to “have shame” (i.e., feeling shame) is always positive; it means to be concerned about one's honour. All human beings seek to have shame; no human being cares to be shamed (Plevnik 1998, 106–107; cf. Bechtel

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the challenge and response will be determined (Neyrey 1994, 118; cf. Esler 2006, 193). There are three modes in which a challenger can respond, namely (a) positive rejection, usually accompanied by scorn and contempt; (b) acceptance of the challenge coupled with a counter-challenge; and (c) no response, with resulting dishonour (Esler 2006, 193). This cycle has the possibility of producing “an escalating spiral of hostility” when the shamed party seeks revenge (Esler 2006, 193).

1991, 48). Shame is then the “sensitivity for one’s own reputation, sensitivity to the opinion of others” (Van Eck 1995, 166).<sup>11</sup>

A shameless person, in turn, is one who “does not recognize the rules of human interaction, who does not recognize social boundaries” (Van Eck 1995, 166). A shameless person thus has a dishonourable reputation and the normal social courtesies are not extended to them (Van Eck 1995, 166). They are symbols of the chaotic. Shaming or putting to shame is socially sanctioned. To be shamed is a “loss of social position” (Van Eck 1995, 167). It functioned in three ways. It was a means to (a) ensure desirable behaviour; (b) “preserve social cohesions”; and (c) dominate others (Bechtel 1991, 53; cf. Van Eck 1995, 166). Honour and shame thus function as incentives for “correct” behaviour as defined by one’s community (Matthews 2007, 124). According to Bechtel (1991, 64),

[T]he more recognition, respect, or honor nations or people had in the eyes of others, the more influence, superiority, dominance, and status they had. These qualities were not conferred ‘once for all time’; they were tenuous, shifting entities which shaming threatened.

## A Social-Scientific Analysis of the Representation of Jonah in Terms of Honour and Shame

What follows is an application of the ancient Near Eastern social values that were discussed in the preceding section of this article to the representation of the figure of Jonah.

### Jonah’s Calling and Flight (Jonah 1:1–3)

In 2 Kings 14:25 we read of a prophet named Jonah ben Amittai from Gath-heper who successfully prophesied the extension of the borders of Israel during the reign of Jeroboam II (787–747 B.C.E.) (Simon 1999, 4; Ben Zvi 2003, 47). He appears to have been a true prophet according to the afore-mentioned text, and therefore trustworthy. Due to this, he no doubt had acquired honour. The honorific title נָבִיא (prophet) is not ascribed to Jonah in the book named after him, but it is in 2 Kings 14:25. In turn, he is ascribed honour by inheriting it. His father was אִמִּיתַי (Amittai); his name is derived from the noun אִמְנוּתָא (faithfulness, truth).<sup>12</sup> The reader’s expectation is that Jonah must then be as faithful or truthful as his father.<sup>13</sup> At the beginning of the book of Jonah, the main

11 “Honor, most clearly associated with males, refers to one’s claimed social status and also to public recognition of it. Shame, most closely linked with females, refers to sensitivity towards one’s reputation, or in the negative sense to the loss of honor” (Chance 1994, 142; cf. Bergant 1994, 33–34).

12 The patronym Amittai also hints at the “reliability, faithfulness or trustworthiness” of Yahweh that is evident throughout the book of Jonah.

13 However, as the narrative progresses it becomes clear that Jonah struggles with the God he is to be faithful to and is not like his father in that respect.

character then has ascribed and acquired honour. He also has honour as he stands in a covenantal relationship with Yahweh.

In Jonah 1:2 Yahweh singles Jonah out to prophesy against the Ninevites. “Initially, readers would no doubt be sympathetic to Jonah, sent on a divine mission to evil Nineveh” (Murphy 2012, 324). He responds to Yahweh’s call with disobedience (1:3) when he flees in the opposite direction to Tarshish. Even though his flight was in all likelihood understandable to the initial audience, it probably also decreased his honour in their eyes.<sup>14</sup>

Pertaining to the reference in Jonah 1:3, “and he paid its fair” (וַיִּתֵּן שֹׂכְרָהּ), שֹׂכֵר is used in the Hebrew Bible to refer to the payment of services or work (cf. Deuteronomy 24:15). The noun plus feminine suffix suggests that Jonah paid “her wages” (שֹׂכְרָהּ). This has been interpreted that Jonah, in his haste to flee God, hired the entire ship and its crew to sail him to Tarshish. This interpretation is based on a Jewish exegetical tradition. This has led some rabbis to speculate about Jonah’s wealth (see Tucker 2006, 17; Sasson 1990, 83; Limburg 1993, 44; Simon 1999:6). If this is the case then the wealth of Jonah could be indicative of him having honour, as wealth is a blessing in a world of limited goods.

### **Distress at Sea (Jonah 1:4–16)**

In Jonah 1:5, Jonah goes down to the hold of the ship he boarded to flee to Tarshish, while the sailors all cried to their respective deities. Jonah, the prophet whose duty it is to call out (see 1:2), is notably silent and sleeps. Even when the ship’s captain commands him to pray, Jonah remains quiet (1:6). As a result, the sailors attempt to determine whose fault the storm is by casting lots (1:7). The lot falls on Jonah. In Jonah 1:8 he is subject to a barrage of questions from the sailors: “Please tell us on whose account is this evil on us?! What is your occupation, and where do you come from? What is your country, and from which people are you?” Jonah answers only the last of the sailors’ questions. The first time Jonah speaks in the story, he utters a confession of faith (1:9). This interaction between the sailors and Jonah can be understood in terms of challenge and response. However, Jonah only answers their last question (cf. 1:8): “I am a Hebrew, and Yahweh, the God of the heavens, I fear, who made the sea and the dry land.”<sup>15</sup> However, his claim to identity and his confession is ironic. He is attempting to escape the presence of what appears to be the creator of the cosmos. But by answering honestly that the storm is due to his doing, and by admitting his guilt, he manages to save some face.

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14 A reason that is often cited by scholars for Jonah’s flight is that if he should prophesy against Nineveh, and the city is not destroyed, he would appear to be a false prophet. This interpretation is first attested in the *Lives of the Prophets*, which dates to the 1st century C.E. (Limburg 1993, 42).

15 The designation “Hebrew” is mainly used in contexts where there is interaction with members of other nations; see Genesis 14:13; 41:12; Exodus 1:16; 3:18; 1 Samuel 4:6 (Simon 1999:11).



In Jonah 1:12, Jonah answers the sailors' exasperated question about what to do with him by stating that they should throw him overboard for the storm to cease and confesses that it is on his account that the storm has struck them. His motives for instructing them to do so are unclear. Does he sacrifice himself to save the sailors' lives (which would be an honourable motive), or does he simply not care whether he (or the sailors) lives or dies (a shameful attitude)? However, in the light of his expressed desire to die in Chapter 4, it might be that he has little regard for his life. He would rather die than proclaim against Nineveh as commanded. With each descent in the story, he is losing some of his honour. This does not appear to bother him. He is bent on fleeing—or even on dying—rather than prophesy against Nineveh, knowing what the outcome of his prophecy could be (cf. 3:10; 4:2).

### **Inside the Fish (Jonah 2)**

In Chapter 2, Jonah voices a lament while inside the fish that leads to his salvation (cf. 2:10). His utterance of a hymn of salvation when he has not yet been saved is ironic and adds to his shame. While inside the fish, Jonah descends into Sheol. The sphere of Sheol is profane and polluted, thus shaming the prophet since he is in an unclean realm. It is the furthest possible place from the temple and Yahweh's presence. In 2:5, Jonah expresses his desire to see the temple again. He appears to conveniently forget that he was the one who instructed the sailors to throw him into the sea when he states that Yahweh had thrown him into the deep, into the heart of the sea (2:3).

In Jonah 2:9, Jonah makes the following statement: "Those who revere worthless idols, abandon their loyalty." It is not clear who is implied with this statement. Does it imply that the sailors or Ninevites, i.e., the foreigners, revere worthless idols? It would appear that Jonah attempts to contrast himself with such people. However, in the light of Jonah's attitude towards foreigners, it could equally well be applicable to him. When he forgets the loyalty and covenantal love that each Israelite has to show towards orphans, widows, and even foreigners, he worships nothing but a worthless idol—his faith then becomes dictated by dogma and laws, instead of mercy and pity.

Jonah promises to sacrifice and to pay what he offered, but there is no indication from the story that he does so. Jonah is on the receiving end of patronage by Yahweh when he is shown mercy, as Yahweh commands the fish to vomit Jonah onto dry land (2:11). God heeds Jonah's prayer, bestowing mercy on his stubborn subject.

### **Jonah's Second Calling and Obedience (Jonah 3:1–3b)**

Yahweh calls to his stubborn prophet a second time (3:2). Finally, obedience! This results in some of his esteem being restored in the eyes of the reader; however, a hint of pity on the part of the audience may still be present.

### **Distress in Nineveh (Jonah 3:3c–10)**

Less than halfway into the city, Jonah delivers his prophecy (3:4): “Still forty days and Nineveh will be overturned!” Jonah enters only a third of the way into the city, yet all “the people of Nineveh” responded to his call. “The rapidity of their reaction contrasts with the slow reaction of the prophet himself: he submitted to his God only after ‘three days and three nights’ in the belly of the fish” (Simon 1999:28). The citizens of Nineveh—and their animals—respond by mourning and fasting. They are depicted as god-fearing, thus honourable.

Regarding Jonah 3:8, Simon writes, “Whereas the sailors called out to the LORD (1:14), whom Jonah had identified as the author of the tempest (1:9), the Ninevites are to call out to Elohim, an undefined ‘God,’ probably because Jonah never explicitly stated the name of the deity who sent him” (Simon 1999, 32). Jonah was either lax in mentioning this in his haste to deliver his short prophecy, or intentionally withheld this information. Either way, the impression of Jonah this creates for the reader is not one that reflects positively on him.

In 3:10, God feels pity for the Ninevites and turns from his threat of destruction. His mercy appears to outweigh his desire to punish.

### **Outside Nineveh (Jonah 4)**

At the beginning and at the end of Chapter 4 we read of Jonah’s mood. In 4:1, he is angry. In 4:9–10 we read that Yahweh questions him about the reasonableness of his anger at Yahweh’s concern for the Ninevites and their animals. We also read of a challenge initiated by Jonah (4:2–3): “Oh, Yahweh! Was this not what I said while I was still in my own land? Therefore, I was eager to flee to Tarshish, for I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and very loving, and you feel sorry over evil. And now, Yahweh, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live!” Yahweh responds with “Is it reasonable of you to be angry?” (4:4). Jonah does not immediately respond to this question. In 4:8, we read of his response: “It is better for me to die than to live.” Once more, in 4:9, Yahweh enquires as to the reasonableness of his anger. Jonah again responds that he is so angry that death is preferable to living.

Interestingly, we have a “contest” between God and Jonah. Jonah loses face in these interactions. However, God is depicted as patient when steering Jonah, via his questions, in the direction of understanding the pettiness of his anger, and God’s pity. Jonah’s hope that God would change his mind is reflected in him building a booth outside the city to see what would become of her (4:5).

Jonah becomes glad about the tiny plant sent by Yahweh to cover him, viewing this as a “conciliatory gesture by the Lord toward His prophet” (Simon 1999, 40). However,

Yahweh also sends a worm to eat the plant and a scorching or sultry east wind to torment him.

In 4:8, by wishing to die, Jonah speaks his mind. Thus, the prayers of the sailors and Ninevites for their lives to be spared are heeded, whereas the prophet of Yahweh's prayer to die is not.

In Yahweh's speech in 4:10–11, it becomes clear that God has great concern for his creations, proportionately much more than the exceeding joy Jonah had over the tiny plantlet. In general, Jonah is shamed throughout the story. He is more concerned with his honour and what people think of him. He wishes to be depicted as a pious and honourable individual, but he is a false prophet.

At the end of their verbal contest, God gets in the final word, which also functions to teach Jonah about mercy and compassion (4:10–11). The book of Jonah also ends with a rhetorical question, requiring of the initial audience to answer it themselves. Jonah is notably silent at the end of the book, typical of his silent protest throughout. In the game of challenge and response he lost honour to Yahweh.

Jonah would have been honourable if his judgment on Nineveh came true, as he would have been deemed a true prophet (see Jeremiah 27–28). However, Jonah is “shamed” when Nineveh is delivered and he appears to be a false prophet. This then lies behind his anger towards God (Jonah 4:1–4) and his desire to die. “For him, nothing less than death will free him from this shame he feels (4:3), unless, of course, the city is indeed destroyed” (Jonker and Arendse 2005, 56).

## The Self-Perception of the Yehudite Literati from the Late Persian Period as Evident in the Book of Jonah

The centre of this little book's fictive universe is Jonah. He is the protagonist who is created in the author's image (cf. Handy 2007, 108). Jonah's theology—and by implication also that of the Yehudite literati—is anthropocentric in nature, depicting a god who is more concerned with elites (such as Nineveh and Jonah) than those beneath them (such as the sailors) (Handy 2007, 108).

Jonah is depicted as a channel or (unwilling) mediator between Yahweh and those who do not know God. Even when disobedient, Jonah spreads the worship of Jerusalem's deity. Thus, Jonah, a Hebrew prophet, serves Yahweh and inadvertently mediates between Yehud and the gentile world, just as is implied of the Yehudite literati. Both Jonah and the Yehudite literati would claim that they know the attributes of God on the basis of their knowledge of sacred texts (Ben Zvi 2003, 66).

Like most in-groups, the Yehudite literati would have considered that which is good in Judean tradition to be good for the wider world as well. Pertaining to the book of Jonah,

“[T]he moral norm for all peoples is that of Yehud’s elite. This is not surprising given that the story is written by Yehud’s elite” (Handy 2007, 106).

The book of Jonah also says something about how Jonah and the Yehudite literati understood authority: it is to be obeyed. Jerusalem would have been a hub of orders coming in from above in the social hierarchy, and of orders going out to outlying areas of Yehud. Thus, of central concern to the elite in Jerusalem was the receiving and carrying out of orders (Handy 2007, 107).<sup>16</sup> The Yehudite literati, and the governing circles in Jerusalem, lived under an authoritarian system during the Persian period. “While a certain local autonomy existed for the regional priesthood and regional governors who could control the local populace through legislation, orders and coercion, they too were under the command of the Persian authorities” (Handy 2007, 106–107).

The self-designation of Jonah and the Yehudite literati as Israelite or Judean reflects their cognisance of the existence of “others” to whom they do not belong (Handy 2007, 119). Nonetheless, Jonah and the Yehudite literati accepted the social structures of their world. The Ninevites were considered to be wicked; however, according to Handy (2007, 125),

the shift from total wickedness (never displayed in the story at all) to an entire imperial city debasing itself before Yahweh (displayed as good behavior in Jonah) suggests that the Ninevites were reasonable people who could do right if shown the error of their ways.

So then also the Persian Empire. What then was the Empire’s “wickedness” that they should ideally have debased themselves over? Are we dealing with the book of Jonah serving as a religious polemic? Handy (2007, 126) writes,

[T]he work may, however, reflect a desire on the part of the author to see Yahweh, on the one hand, equated with the ruling deity of the Persians, and to be acknowledged, even if only as one among many, as an important deity by the commoners of the wider world. Both religious desires would have placed small, truly insignificant Yehud on a worldwide stage in the minds of the Jerusalem elite. And many members of elite societies love to “see and be seen” among the powerful.

Ben Zvi (2003, 99–100) points out that “the book of Jonah reflects and carries a message of inner reflection, and to some extent critical self-appraisal of the group within which and for which this book was written.” To the Yehudite literati, the authorial voice was authoritative. Even though the book has the trappings of a meta-prophetic book, it was still considered to contain an inspired message (cf. Ben Zvi 2003, 100). The author of the book and the group for which the book was then penned would not have been considered as in opposition to the Yehudite literati (Ben Zvi 2003, 101). “The usual

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16 For a list of the orders within the book of Jonah, consult Handy (2007, 107).

expectation in the prophetic books is for the readership to identify itself with the prophetic character” (Ben Zvi 2003, 101). It is then improbable that Jonah stood for a group of non-Israelites and that they would have been its readership (Ben Zvi 2003, 102).

It stands to reason that the Yehudite literati were not only familiar with prophetic texts, but also penned some. “When they did so they identified with and expressed the thoughts and words of authoritative prophetic voices of the past and even that of YHWH” (Ben Zvi 2003, 106). Ben Zvi (2003, 11, 114) wrote of the humoristic and satirical elements in the book of Jonah that they must then have been part of the self-perception of the Yehudite literati and have served as a form of self-critique. Another element of the self-perception of the Yehudite literati present in the text is that being “well acquainted with the correct texts does not necessarily guarantee correct theological knowledge or attitude” (Ben Zvi 2003, 110).

By turning from his wrath, Yahweh is depicted as gracious, merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He also relents from punishment (cf. Exodus 34:6–7 and Jonah 4:2). Thus, from this perspective, Jonah’s confession, and what he has learned from authoritative texts, is not wrong (Ben Zvi 2003, 110). However, the post-exilic community was all too aware that Yahweh could carry out severe judgment, and had done so in the past (Ben Zvi 2003, 112). Ben Zvi (2003, 112) remarks in this regard that “Jonah’s mistake was to commit himself to his interpretative choice, which was evidently a narrow one.”<sup>17</sup>

## Summary and Conclusion

The question which this article set out to answer was what can be gleaned from the book of Jonah about the self-perception of its author(ship) and intended audience through a social-scientific analysis. Firstly, an overview was given of what we know about the authorship of the book of Jonah and how the author(s) is related to the main character. This was followed by an overview of the values of honour and shame, and an application of how Jonah is represented in this regard. This analysis was then related to the self-perception of the author(ship) and audience, for whom the book was written, due to their association with the main character.

It can now be asked what the book of Jonah has to say to and about the male, Yehudite literati, educated in Jerusalem. Did they also struggle with the mercy and pity of Yahweh towards foreigners, specifically in their case the Persian elite? Were they aware that

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17 The book of Jonah points out that repentance has significance (cf. Jeremiah 18:7–8; 2 Chronicles 33:13), but that it is not everything. Yahweh is not obliged to relent from punishment when someone repents (cf., among others, Amos 5:15; Joel 2:14; Jonah 3:9; Zephaniah 2:3; see also Jonah 4:11, Jeremiah 11:11, 14; Ezekiel 8:18; cf. Jeremiah 4:28) (Ben Zvi 2003:28).

their honour was subtly challenged in the book of Jonah? Like Jonah, did they think they knew and understood the actions of Yahweh through their study of authoritative literature, yet were surprised to learn that he can display mercy even to the most unlikely subjects?

As Jonah has ascribed honour for being the son of Amittai and being a Hebrew, so also—in their own eyes—do the Yehudite literati have honour due to their covenant relationship with Yahweh and their association with Israel/Judah. However, they run the risk of shame by not following the “call to prophesy,” the requirement to be mediators of Yahweh’s word. Like Jonah is called to proclaim to his god by the sailors, so the Yehudite literati are expected to be vocal about their religious orientation and relationship with the(ir) creator deity, and their cultural identity.

Like Jonah, the Yehudite literati think they know God, and to an extent they do, due to being in a covenant relationship with him, and having studied sacred texts, but not his whole nature, nor are they able to predict his actions. The book of Jonah then challenges the Yehudite literati by asking whether the same mercy bestowed upon Nineveh can also be applicable to the foreign empire of their own day, namely the Persians, towards whom they might have had ambivalent feelings. This may not be to the liking of the literati, to the point of death perhaps, but the will of Yahweh will not be dictated to by the whims of his “prophets.” Their relationship with their deity may come across as a contest of wills, but they are still required to be obedient in the light of the covenant requirements.

This community considers itself singled out to “prophesy” or be an example to the “other,” likely the Persian Empire. They are called to (even inadvertently, like Jonah was an unwilling messenger) live the worship of Yahweh as an example to the “foreigners.” “Jonah’s narrative of ‘honour’ and then “‘shame’ would have cautioned the Jewish nation against a too easy presumption on their ‘ascribed honour’ as the only criterion for understanding God’s actions of grace and mercy in the world” (Jonker and Arendse 2005, 56).

The honour of the Yehudite literati is questioned. Are they as honourable and knowing of God’s ways as they think they are? The book of Jonah answers this question in the negative.

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