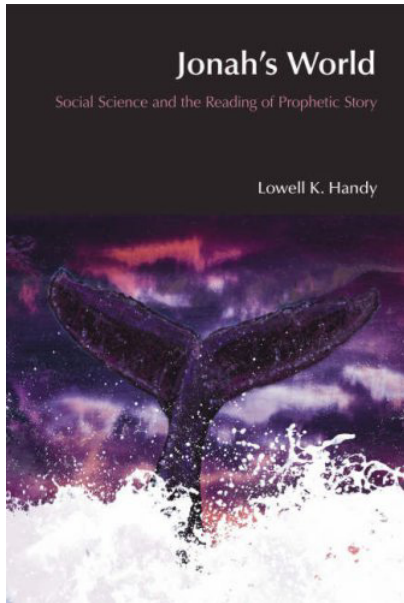


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Handy, Lowell K.

Jonah's World: Social Science and the Reading of Prophetic Story

BibleWorld

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This volume aims to reconstruct the social world into which the book of Jonah was released and which it reflects. It thus is concerned with the social context of the book itself, its author, and its early audience, seeking to determine the influence of the social context on the text as well as the text's influence on its context. These aims are set out in the introduction, which also offers some comments on the story of Jonah in the context of the Book of the Twelve (where it balances the oracles against the nations found in other prophetic books) and that of other biblical short stories, an area that had been explored by Handy in his earlier work, *Entertaining Faith: Reading Short Stories in the Bible* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2000). Handy accepts the widely held view that the book of Jonah was written in the Persian period, a time when Judah had a definable identity, was essentially at peace, and "the events of both Assyria's demise and Babylonian incorporation into the Persian Empire were well in the past and yet still of interest to the intellectual circles" (6–7).

Chapter 1, entitled "A Scribe's-Eye View," argues that the author was a trained scribe from "the upper echelons of ancient Judean society" who had the ability, knowledge, time, and means to compose an original literary composition. Handy considers the place of scribes in ancient Near Eastern society generally and in Judean society during the

Persian period in particular, noting that Judean scribes at that time would have been serving two masters: the Jerusalem temple cult and the Persian administration. The book of Jonah therefore “reflects both a Judean theology and an imperial polity” (15). Jonah’s world is depicted through scribal eyes, with the prophet being portrayed as a courtier who mediates between God and the king of Nineveh (as well as the other characters in the story). Observations on how scribes would have been perceived by other members of society conclude the first chapter.

The second chapter discusses Jonah’s “imaginary real world,” which is described as “the literary stylization of ... a world that never existed out of locations that had existed” (23). Employing real locations, the author built on the mental associations these places evoked in his audience while at the same time creatively reshaping that world. Regarding the locales of the story, Handy notes that: (1) Joppa would have been seen as “the boundary between the common, safe, homeland and the foreign, imaginary and totally different ‘other world’” (27); (2) Tarshish (for which an identification with Cádiz, the ancient Phoenician trading port Tartessos, is favored) would have referred to the end of the world, an area outside the Persian Empire with an unfamiliar culture; (3) while Nineveh, only a minor town during the time of the Persian Empire, would have been essentially a memory, the capital of a former empire that could be treated in quite a benign manner. The references to the Jerusalem temple (2:5, 8), the fourth locale mentioned in the story, indicate that for the circles responsible for the book Jerusalem and its temple, not the foreign places mentioned above, were the real center of the universe. Handy concludes the chapter with observations on the division of Jonah’s universe into the four regions of sea, land, Sheol, and heaven.

Chapter 3 investigates “the divine realm.” Beginning with the sailors, Handy notes that they represent a typical eastern Mediterranean polytheistic background. Interestingly, and perhaps surprisingly, the story does not insist on the nonexistence of the sailors’ gods, nor does it satirize the sailors’ belief in other gods. The author also has no interest in the actual religious traditions of the Assyrians, so much so that Jonah’s Nineveh is best placed in the Persian religious climate in which “the God of heaven” (1:9) would have corresponded to Ahura Mazda. Comments on prayer and ritual (sacrifices, fasting) follow, which help to explain the relevant aspects of the story by outlining the cultural background and significance of these actions. But Handy’s conclusions regarding the portrayal of the Assyrians are perhaps the most significant aspect of this part of the discussion. “Real Assyrians,” he notes, would presumably

need to know which deity this was and then determine whether Assur or Ishtar would care one jot whether this Yahweh character claimed he could overturn them. Such is not the response; these Ninevites are no Assyrians, they are people

that know a single deity can and will run the fate of their city and they act accordingly. Their mourning petition is successful; just as it would have been if they were good Jerusalemites. These are fictional Ninevites in the mode and model of the author's making. (53)

Jonah's God, in turn, reflects the scribe's understanding of Yahweh envisaged as a human ruler who possesses enormous power and expects total obedience from his subjects. As a character in the story, Yahweh is powerful (being *almost* omnipotent, with Jonah enjoying some relative freedom), wrathful (which is a constituent part of his justice and maintenance of order), and merciful (which is necessary in a world where individuals enjoy a degree of freedom).

In the fourth chapter, entitled "The Human Dimension," the focus switches to the human characters. Some comments on different types of prophets are offered, followed by observations on the issue of false prophecy. Jonah, however, is a "literary construct," a prophet from times gone by, when prophecy was still common. His brief message, which conforms to the prophetic genre of oracles against the nations, is presented by the author only to be undermined as reflecting a nationalistic ideology that is to be rejected. Perhaps even more important, the portrayal of Jonah as "a channel for the worship of Yahweh" indicates that the Yehud elite responsible for the book saw itself "as a prophetic community providing the message of the true deity to gentiles who otherwise would not know it" (67).

Discussion of the sailors and the background of merchant marines in the Mediterranean leads Handy to conclude that the story is not too concerned with reality (such as the difficulty of traveling west or the timescale involved in finding a suitable ship, arranging for provisions to be loaded for what would have been a lengthy journey, etc.). It thus comes as no surprise that the Ninevites, "the faceless populace of the capital of a world empire," whose wickedness is left undefined and who in the story do no evil, "could stand for the activities of the entire empire or for any world empire" (75). Handy pays some special attention to the outward signs of the Ninevites' repentance, which clearly express their humility before God, before moving on to the "king of Nineveh," who again is a literary construct epitomizing the "Great Ruler of the World" figure also found in other biblical short stories.

Chapter 5 considers what Handy calls an "unnatural nature," which functions as "an extension of deity" in achieving the will of God. The discussion moves from the *dag gadol* and the *tola'ah*, whose exact nature is unknown but who would both have evoked an element of horror in the readership of this tale (the *dag gadol* because it features all the elements characteristic of a monster; the *tola'ah* because of its association with death and

corpses) to the *behemah*, whose inclusion in the populace's public penance was not absurd (by Greek standards) because "any creature that could stand for a human populace in a sacrifice to the deities would in some fashion be symbolically related to the population" (92). The plants (the *sup* in 2:6 and the *qiqayon* in 4:6) also some receive attention, as does the weather (the storm wind at sea in ch. 1 and the east wind in 4:8), which, together with the plants and animals, serves as a good and obedient servant of Yahweh—in stark contrast to the protagonist.

Having dealt with the characters of the story, Handy moves on to the book's understanding of good and evil, noting that this reflects the Yehud's elite's interest in maintaining order and stability as well as a strong emphasis upon the need to care about other people, including those from different ethnic, social, and religious backgrounds. The ethical behavior of God, one of the key issues of the story, is discussed briefly, both in relation to the question of acceptable justice (with regard to the Ninevites) and with respect to the sailors' plight, which is "mostly invisible in the story," probably due to the elite's lack of interest in lower-class persons. The goodness of the human characters and nature as a moral force are discussed even more briefly, before Handy turns his attention to the social context for raising these moral questions, pointing to Judean tradition and, in particular, Yehud's elite as the definitive authorities on these matters.

Chapter 7 looks at the genre of the book of Jonah, which is described as a short story and a comedic narrative. Handy in this context offers brief discussions of issues such as history/historiography, legends, fairy tales/miracle stories, hyperbole, humor, stock characters, and stock narrative plot devices as these relate to biblical texts, including Jonah. There are some further reflections on the social background of the circles responsible for the book, but the main objective of this chapter seems to be to make a case for all biblical short stories to be understood as "entertainment with a purpose," as didactic material that seeks to teach a variety of lessons.

The final chapter sums up Handy's conclusions, affirming again that Nineveh is to be read as referring to the center of Persian control at the time of writing. The story thus acknowledges the political authority of the Persian Empire while maintaining that, ultimately, everyone is under the control and jurisdiction of Yahweh, "the deity as embodied in the traditions of the Jerusalem elite" (124), whose temple in Jerusalem is the religious center, which defines the ultimate political and moral norms. Handy also offers some brief comments on traditional (Jewish, Christian and Islamic) and contemporary interpretations of the story, and he reflects, equally briefly, on different reading strategies, depending on whether the story and its norms are accepted or rejected. The decision is said to be that of the reader, but Handy is prepared to suggest that "any useful readings of Jonah ... fall between these extremes" (130).

This study does not feature any surprising or novel conclusions, nor does it present much new evidence that could not be found in the major commentaries, but it is well-researched and gathers the relevant material conveniently into one place. Handy makes a compelling case for the book of Jonah to be a work of literature that does not aim to offer a historical account of “the real world” but seeks to convey what he calls “entertainment with a purpose.” He also argues persuasively for the book to reflect a scribal perspective from the time of the Persian Empire, and he presents a cogent analysis of the aims pursued by Yehud’s elite in producing and transmitting the story when he stresses their emphasis on Yahweh’s ultimate control over the Persian political authorities.

In his final chapter, Handy wonders briefly whether a social-science perspective makes any difference to how the story of Jonah is read. His own answer is rather modest when he says that, “if the social-science material brought to bear on the story of Jonah does nothing else it should highlight the extent to which social status colored the production of the story and how geographical locations could be used for symbolic casting of the plot” (130–31). This the social-science perspective clearly achieves, but to talk merely about the *social status* of the circles responsible for the book is too restrictive, given that other factors, such as inherited religious traditions, would have played an important role as well.

Research into the social and cultural milieu in which the book originated clearly does make a contribution to our understanding of the story, even if there is a slight danger of gathering material in the process that affects our reading very little. The present study features some examples of this, such as Handy’s discussion of the different types of prophets found in the ancient Near East, which does not appear to make any real difference to how we perceive the prophet Jonah. The other main weakness of Handy’s work is that a number of issues would have deserved fuller discussion (see my frequent references to his “brief comments” above), but having said that, the book nonetheless deserves attention for the light it throws on the social world that produced the ever-fascinating story of Jonah.