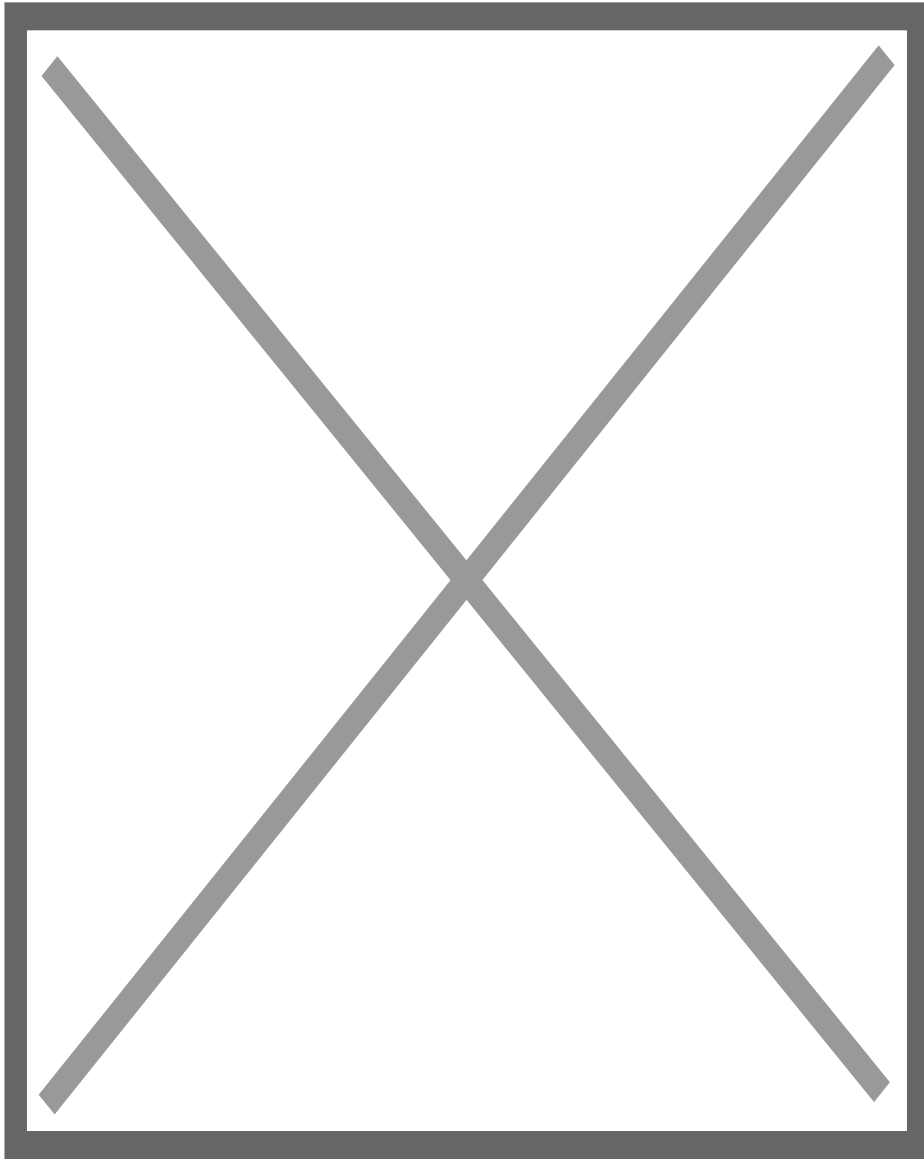


Terrible leaders of the Bible

When I remember the story of Jonah the insufferable prophet, I am filled with a strange hope.

by [Peter Choi](#) in the [October 2025](#) issue



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In the pantheon of great leaders, if we're honest, we confront one disappointment after another. Our history books, despite the occasional fawning hagiography, mostly tell complex stories of culpability and struggle. Biblical characters have set the bar particularly low, giving us a long list of problematic figures. To name a few: a craven liar willing to trade his wife for safety (Abraham), a fugitive murderer (Moses), a conniving adulterer notorious for his violent abuse of power (David), and a prophet turned warrior who slays hundreds in a fit of righteous rage (Elijah).

On this ignominious list, Jonah stands out for his pettiness. He is a sniveling grumbler who tells God he is “angry enough to die” because God had mercy on the city of Nineveh. When God first gives Jonah his assignment to the great city, he boards a ship heading in the exact opposite direction, promptly goes below deck, and falls asleep. It’s hard not to admire his audacity.

Jonah is an inconvenient figure, ill-suited for moralizing lessons, a questionable prop for cautionary tales: *Disobedience is pointless. There’s nowhere you can run from God, so don’t even try—unless you want to get swallowed up by a great big fish.* But this moral logic doesn’t hold up in the rest of the story, where we see God going to great lengths to accommodate Jonah’s increasingly sour disposition.

In the first chapter of Jonah, when panicked sailors demand to know Jonah’s story, he responds with a profession of faith that serves a dual purpose as a dig at the pagan worshipers of the sea (*Yam* in Hebrew): “I worship YHWH, who made *Yam*.” Those reading between the lines might hear: *My God made your god; please tread carefully; now let me go back to sleep.* The sailors, in their moment of vulnerability-induced openness, are terrified that this sleepy, lackadaisical passenger may have offended a powerful deity.

Moments earlier, they threw valuable cargo overboard. Many English translations suggest something that isn’t in the original text of verse 5: that the sailors’ intention is to “lighten the ship.” This interpretation aligns with our modern scientific sensibilities: making the ship lighter reduces the chances of drowning.

But the Hebrew sentence is not so straightforward, containing an ambiguous pronoun with two awkward prepositions: they threw their cargo into the sea “to lighten *it from on* them.” Given the immediate context of intense prayer under dire circumstances, the most straightforward interpretation might be that the sailors throw their cargo overboard as an act of pious supplication to appease *Yam*.

This alternate reading becomes even more plausible when we see the broad structure of Jonah 1 as a movement from worship of *Yam* to worship of YHWH. The sailors, who initially throw cargo overboard as a tribute to *Yam* (1:5), later pray and offer sacrifices to YHWH (1:14–16). As if to underscore an underlying conflict between *Yam* and YHWH, each name occurs exactly 11 times in the Hebrew text.

At the heart of this epic struggle is Jonah, a reluctant and begrudging prophet who seems to care more about comeuppance and condemnation than repentance and redemption. Keen to avoid preaching to Nineveh, he inadvertently becomes a means of deliverance for the sailors. Far from a model of prophetic virtue or excellence, Jonah typifies the common knee-jerk human instinct to preserve inherited boundaries.

There is, then, a larger lesson in this story, as in many other biblical stories, about imperfect leaders and God’s work through them despite their shortcomings. Placing trust in human saviors has been a perennial temptation throughout the ages. However, there is always a greater hope beyond singular individuals. The arc of history bending toward justice has never depended on a person but on a divine plan that defies set patterns.

The scarcity of competent, trustworthy leaders need not be a reason to despair. It has always been the work of resilient communities to clean up the messes created by manic individuals who veered off course and led others astray.

Likewise, it has never been easy for long-established, entrenched communities to open their doors to strangers and foreigners. It shouldn’t be surprising to us that the crux of Jonah’s complaint lies in the possibility of God’s grace extending to a foreign city like Nineveh.

If Jonah’s feverish anger at God’s mercy toward the outsider is hard to understand, we need look no further than American history and contemporary society. Until recently, I believed that the lessons of history about the

futility of dehumanizing and exclusionary practices might be sufficient to deter us from repeating many of the mistakes of our past. Today, I'm coming to accept that there are lessons that new generations will have to learn anew. Still, the stories of those who have gone before can give us encouragement to persevere when the plot thickens, dense clouds surround us, the way forward is unclear, and we are so jumbled that it is hard to be certain what side of the story we are on, whether for good or for harm.

When we realize that the wisdom tradition of Abraham and Moses produced the likes of Elijah, who goes on a murderous rampage at Mt. Carmel, and Jonah, who chastises God for having mercy on Nineveh, then what might we expect from future leaders building on the legacy of our complicated past? The stories of scripture constantly destabilize our expectations about who is good and who is not.

As much as I would like to stand in judgment over Jonah, I do not know where I stand in the story's narrative logic. Thankfully, God is gracious to all—to an insufferable prophet, to false-god-worshipping sailors, and to a city of great wickedness.

Despite my confusion, a strange hope comes over me when I remember the story of Jonah. It has nothing to do with reveling in his misfortune or ungenerous attitude toward others. It is about a faith tradition that finds these stories worth collecting and telling, generation after generation, to remind us that selfishness and small-mindedness are never the final story.

In a world of sulking prophets and scheming tyrants, it doesn't help that so many of our leaders aren't perfect. But maybe that's the point. The way of love and mercy has long persisted under their shadow. It has always been so.