

## What is faith? (10 – 14 years)

### Key words and concepts

- **Abraham:** Abraham is often known as the Father of Judaism. It was Abraham's faith in God, having been brought up in the polytheistic society of Ur, that initially singled him out.
- **Isaac:** Isaac was the only son of Abraham and Sarah (although Abraham had another child, Ishmael, by Sarah's slave Hagar); Isaac's arrival was miraculous, as Sarah was past childbearing age when he was born. He is believed to be the outcome of God's promise to give Abraham a line of descendants. His name means 'laughter' and expresses the old couple's joy at finally having a child together.
- **Akedah:** This is the Hebrew word for 'binding' and is the name given by Jews to the story of Abraham and Isaac; Abraham binds his son before placing him on the altar.
- **Sacrifice:** the ancient Hebrews practised ritual sacrifice, slaughtering animals and giving them to God as burnt offerings; neighbouring tribes also practised human sacrifice.
- **Faith:** the word faith could refer to someone's confidence or trust in God or a higher principle, or their devotion or willingness to obey.
- **Angel:** in the Tenakh, angels are supernatural messengers who communicate God's wishes to His followers.
- **Covenant:** The word Covenant, which literally means an 'agreement', is taken by Jews and Christians to refer to a number of promises that God makes to Abraham. For the purposes of this resource, the most relevant one is the promise of numerous descendants. "As for Me, this is My covenant with you: You shall be the father of a multitude of nations. And you shall no longer be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I make you the father of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fertile, and make nations of you; and kings shall come forth from you. I will maintain My covenant between Me and you, and your offspring to come, as an everlasting covenant throughout the ages, to be God to you and to your offspring to come. I assign the land you sojourn in to you and your offspring to come, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting holding. I will be their God" (Genesis 17:4-8).
- **Moriah:** This is the name of the mountain range where God commanded Abraham to take Isaac for sacrifice.
- **Scripture:** This word, which literally means 'written down', refers normally to the holy texts of a religion.
- **Revelation:** The process by which God makes His will known to human beings.
- **Tenakh:** The Jewish scriptures, considered to be revealed by God; the Torah is included in the Tenakh. The Tenakh is also the first half of the Christian Bible, in which it is called the 'Old Testament'.
- **Torah:** The first five books of the Jewish scriptures are called the 'Torah'; they are the books of law and the most holy texts in Judaism; the story of Abraham and Isaac is found in Genesis, the first book of the Torah.
- **Talmud:** The Talmud is the collected text of Judaism's 'oral tradition'; it contains the different opinions of thousands of rabbis on a variety of subjects, including the correct interpretation of the difficult story of Abraham and Isaac.

The distinctiveness of the approach offered here is that it encourages students to do justice to the *ambiguity* of the scriptural source for the story of Abraham and Isaac. This is a story that challenges believers in both the Jewish and Christian traditions and has produced a range of divergent interpretations.

It is tempting, for 10-14 year olds, to present this story as a simple example of faith as being prepared to give up anything for God, and then to ask students what they would be prepared to give up or sacrifice for the values that are important in their lives.

Such an approach tends to flatten or ignore the deep problems that believers encounter in their attempts to make sense of this text. The treatment of this stimulus is inspired by the concept of the *anguish of Abraham* that we find in Kierkegaard's well-known philosophical exploration of Genesis 22, *Fear and Trembling*. Although it is not likely that you will find much in *Fear and Trembling* that is directly accessible to students of age 10 to 14, the text is available [online >>](#) and recommended for background exploration. Kierkegaard's is not a conventional or mainstream Christian reading, and it certainly does not arise from the Jewish tradition, although much of what Kierkegaard is concerned about is foreshadowed in the range of ingenious interpretations of the story that are offered in the Talmudic texts.

Kierkegaard sets himself the task of understanding Abraham psychologically rather than reading him as a 'type' or analogical figure in the text, and offers a range of different attempts to do so. His exploration centres on what faith must mean if Abraham is considered the exemplar for it. What are the grounds of faith, what is its relation to our ordinary or everyday ethical understandings, and what hopes or expectations for the future must it be based on?

### Learning activities

#### Introduction

Explain to the students that over the next few lessons we will be asking the question 'What is Faith?' with particular reference to the Old Testament / Tenakh story of the binding of Isaac / *Akedah*. Ask for initial definitions of the word 'faith' but explain also that this series will have a critical component. We are trying to understand what faith is and why someone would have it, but also what it is acceptable to do out of faith, and what it is appropriate to put our faith in.

#### Mirror

The purpose of the activities suggested below is to establish that students already have perspectives on issues that pertain to the broader question of 'what is faith', with relation to the stimulus text, and this prepares them to see the stimulus as challenging and relevant to their own perspectives. The issues are the nature of scripture and revelation, their views on whether and how God might communicate directly with people, and the question of what is most important in their lives, and on what grounds they might give it up. This prepares them to engage with some of the complexities and ambiguities of the scriptural story of Abraham and Isaac.

- Ask students to consider / list the ways in which people believe that God communicates with people. Ask students to produce a mind map as groups or as a whole class. Select individual students to consider how they would feel if they thought God was communicating to them in one of these ways. What doubts or concerns would they have? What other explanations might they give for what was happening? Encourage students to add these different explanations to their mind map.

- Ask students to list three things that are most precious to them. In a pair activity, a partner is to try to persuade them to give up that object, person or experience. Were they successful? What would the cost be? Select pairs to feed back to the class – perhaps try to get an interesting range of precious possessions, people and costs.
- Drawing on previous answers, as a class, create NINE ways of seeing scripture, or religious texts. Create together, whatever the individuals' own views, all can contribute. For example: 'direct word of God', 'God's attempt to communicate with humans', 'interpreted by humans', 'written by humans', etc.
- Using these ways of seeing scripture, ask pairs to rank them in a diamond nine shape for themselves. On the board, show the continuum of views towards scripture, with 'totally reliable' at the top and 'totally unreliable' at the bottom.

### Window

Find a clip of Abraham's sacrifice online, such as the animation created by 'Testament'.

Alternatively, find a graphic bible version of the story online and print for groups.

Teach the word *Akedah* ('binding', see key vocabulary). Ask students to watch out for this moment.

The sacrifice occurs in Genesis 22. Students will benefit from being given certain contextual information:

- The history of Abraham's faith relationship with God, for example his willingness to leave his home, or his doubt when God promises him a line of descendants (and hence his recourse to Hagar).
- The importance of Isaac as the miraculous fulfilment of God's promise to Abraham, the meaning of Isaac's name (laughter).

Remind students about the key question. We are trying to understand 'What is faith' in relation to Abraham as an example of religious faith. What was Abraham's faith, what did it mean to him, and does that make sense to us?

It is important, having watched the video, to return to the scriptural source of the story. Read Genesis 22 with the class and invite responses. Invite students to consider why God decides to test Abraham, what they would have done in his place etc. (See previous section for a list of appropriate questions to ask here).

Analysis task: point out also that Abraham's reaction in the video/ graphic bible offers a particular interpretation of how Abraham responds.

Discuss what is mentioned in the text, as opposed to what is shown in the video/ graphic bible. Ask students what other interpretive decisions have been made, and what alternatives could have been chosen.

### Variation

Students are now introduced to a variety of ways of interpreting the video/ graphic bible. The reason for choosing these interpretations is to introduce key decision points around whether students will choose to try to understand Abraham's complex psychology or whether they will see him as a cipher or analogue for some other important truth; they will also need to make judgements about the nature and coherence of scripture.

Introduce students to three ways that can be used to make sense of the story of Abraham, using the stimulus cards available at <http://reonline1.wpenline.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/What-is-Faith-cards.pdf>

Students do not have to agree, or to come to their own critical view. The purpose of the cards is to experience a variety of critical views.

Take time to discuss, deconstruct and explore together.

Groups could be set further research to find out more about one view, such as Plato's *Euthyphro* or Molochite child sacrifice.

Further critical views could be a Christological view (considering the story in the light of Christian theology) or a modern philosophical view, such as Jean Paul Satre's.

**Child Sacrifice.** The practice of child sacrifice occurred in the Ancient Near East, such as in the Molochite tribe. The story of Abraham shows God overturning Abraham's *expectation* that God wanted him to sacrifice his son, and the rejection of this practice.

**The problem of God's commands.** This problem is raised in Plato's famous play *Euthyphro*. Euthyphro encounters Socrates and informs him he is taking a certain course of action because the gods demand it. Socrates asks Euthyphro whether his action is good in itself, or only good because the gods demand it. Through this conversation Plato asks on what basis humans should follow the gods' commands.

**The Rabbinic commentaries.** In these Jewish scholarly commentaries of the Tenakh the historical context is offered. At the time of Abraham, the son would be considered as entirely the possession of the father. Therefore Abraham has total control over his son's life and death. However this does not solve the ethical problem of Abraham's own duty of love and care for his son, or Isaac's own right to life. The Rabbinic commentaries view the story as a test of Abraham's faith rather than justifying a father's total control over his children.

Once students have been introduced to these three possible interpretations, particular groups should be given one interpretation to explore in depth. They should then produce a storyboard for their own video, which would present the story of the *Akedah* in the light of this particular interpretation. Link back to your earlier discussion on the interpretive decisions that were made in the video stimulus. Depending on your (or your students') confidence with the range of animation software available online students could also produce these animations.

Conversation

- Role play / drama task. Encourage students to enact the events of the *Akedah* taking it in turns to portray Abraham. At a point in the story of your choice, freeze the frame and interrogate Abraham about his thoughts and feelings. Who does he think is speaking to him? Why is he sure of this? What does he think about what God has asked him to do? Why is he prepared to do it? Encourage other students to question Abraham or further interrogate his answers. They can begin their questions with, "But what about...?" or "What if...?"

This is a critical realist use of drama. This task should not be confused with other uses of drama, which encourage empathy with a believer. Students are being asked to do more here than empathise with a Jewish interpreter of the story, for example. In either articulating their own account of Abraham's psychology, or questioning that of a peer, they are engaging critically with a range of interpretations of this story and beginning to identify their own. They are not so much empathising with Abraham as offering an account of his story's meaning in the context of their own beliefs about scripture. You should explain to students that events are only fixed up to the freeze frame. After that, allow the drama to continue and Abraham's actions to play out in accordance with the discussion, which has just ensued. *Their* Abraham may, if they wish, make other decisions. This would constitute an expression of a critical judgement about the coherence of the story or its validity as the expression of the will of a benevolent God.

Interesting alternatives / extensions are to do the same thing with Isaac, who can be asked to explain what he thinks of his father's actions or decisions, and why he is compliant with them, or even God, depending on whether you think it is appropriate to do this with your class. God could explain his motivation for testing Abraham in this way. I would run this task as described above, meaning that *their* God may, if they wish, make other decisions.

Depending on how much time you have to allocate to this drama activity, students could be assessed on their participation to the task, either through their portrayal of key characters or through their role as questioner.

- Students are well prepared, if appropriate in your context, for a written assessment on the Faith of Abraham. They could write about what it meant for Abraham to have faith and whether they would be able to have the same faith, ensuring that they articulate their view on the nature of Old Testament/ Jewish scripture and refer to a range of possible interpretations of the story.