



# ABRAHAM

## BACKGROUND

Judaism, Christianity and Islam share certain stories and traditions. The story of Abraham's sacrifice of his son is one of the most well-known. Because it is a story common to the three religions it is often taught in RE. However, it is a bloodthirsty and cruel tale – on the surface of it – and the killing of a child by his parent is difficult for most modern sensibilities, especially children themselves.

So religious leaders explain its meaning in different ways. There are also different versions of the story itself. In some, Abraham's son may have actually gone through with the killing, or he may have made a choice not to obey God. And in the Muslim version, it is the older illegitimate son Ismael who is involved - not Isaac the younger (but legitimate) son. And this causes controversy: Mohammed is said to be descended from Ismael, whereas the Jews were supposedly descended from Isaac, the second son. There is no need to go into all of this with a class, but if you want to tell a version that is common to all religions you have to avoid giving the son a name! (Perhaps 'first son' is ambiguous enough to use, as it could mean first son of any sort or first legitimate son so therefore could mean Ismael or Isaac...)

Deciding what the story means is no simple matter. And its meaning is disputed within each religion as well as between them. The theme it inevitably throws up though, whichever way you interpret the events in the story, is Obedience: obedience to God first and foremost. In the questions for this story I use the words 'obey' and 'obedience', even though they are not often used in families and schools. I think it's a good opportunity to teach the word, but you can just as well replace it with 'do what he was told'. Not all children will know the meaning of the word 'sacrifice' - teach it when you get to it in the story or set it up before you start.

## STIMULUS

Here is one version of the story:

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Abraham wanted for many years to have children but none came. He and his wife waited and he thought that he and his wife were now too old. But then God helped them at last, and they had a son. A few years later, when the boy was about eight years old, God told him to sacrifice this son. In those days it was common to sacrifice animals as way of worshipping god - but never people. But Abraham decided to obey God. He took the boy up onto the hill, which was where his people sacrificed animals. The boy was confused because normally they would take an animal with them up the hill to kill, but this time was different. Abraham did not tell his son why. When they got to the place for sacrifice, Abraham took out his knife and raised it up, ready to kill his son. Just before he brought the knife down, he heard the voice of an angel, which said 'Stop! Don't harm him. Now I know that you fear me. Look behind you, there is a lamb in the bush. Sacrifice that instead.' So Abraham let his son go, and killed the lamb instead.

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[This is adapted from the Old Testament, Genesis 22. The first 5 books of the Christian Old Testament make up the Jewish Torah (NB some Jews think that the slight differences in text are significant)]

## QUESTIONS & AVENUES

- ✓ Was Abraham right to obey God?
- ✓ Should the son have obeyed the father? Should children obey parents?
- ✓ Why did God do this to Abraham?

- ✓ Which people should we obey?
- ✓ Should we do what we're told even if we think it's something bad?
- ✓ How do we know what God wants us to do?
- ✓ What can we learn from this story?

## LESSON COMMENTS

Once children have expressed their ideas we want to get them to explore and reconsider those ideas more deeply. With moral issues, one way to do this is to alter the story very slightly and see if children make the same judgement. For example, if we tell a story about someone who steals food, children might judge differently if we say the thief was penniless and starving, or only doing it for a dare, or had just been the victim of a worse crime, or just doing it to teach the victim a lesson, and so on...

### Let's imagine the story was a bit different:

- ✓ First of all, what if the message from God came to Abraham in a dream (not actually God's voice)? Should he have done what the dream told him to?
- ✓ Second, what if Abraham told his son about the dream?