

2



ENCOUNTER WITH SACRED TEXTS:
TEXTS OF VIOLENCE

MODULE TWO

TEXTS OF VIOLENCE

2.1 THE SACRIFICE OF ISAAC: VIDEO CLIP



Figure 2.1
The Video Clip

The video clip shows Michael, Pieter-Jan, Sarah and Ahmed skating together. Suddenly, Michael slips and bumps into Pieter-Jan, causing a wheel to break off of Pieter-Jan's skateboard. Michael and Pieter-Jan start arguing because Pieter-Jan thinks that Michael deliberately broke the skateboard. Pieter-Jan accuses Michael of always acting violently because he is Catholic, and he refers to a story in the Bible where a father murders his own son. The friends go in search of the story about the 'sacrifice of Isaac' and discover the true meaning of this story.

2.2 THE SACRIFICE OF ISAAC: INTERPRETATION

2.2.1 THE STORY: EXPLORATION

[God said,] *“Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer Him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you.”*

So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him.

[...] Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. The two of them walked on together [without the other young men]. Isaac said to his father Abraham, *“Father! The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?”* [...] Abraham said, *“God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.”*

[...] When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar...

Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son.

But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said, *“Abraham, Abraham!”* [...] *“Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.”*

And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. [...]

Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beer-sheba; and Abraham lived at Beer-sheba.

Source: S. DE BRUYN, B. LEMMELIJN & S. VANDEN HEEDE, *Bijbel. Verhalen uit het Oude Testament*, Tielt, Uitgeverij Lannoo, 2017.

For a longer version of this biblical story, see: NRSV, *Genesis 22:1-19*.

ASSIGNMENT. Read the story of 'the Sacrifice of Isaac' (Genesis 22:1-19) and answer the questions below.

In the biblical text, indicate verses ...

• that you do not like;

• that surprise you;

• that you do not understand.



Figure 2.2
Caravaggio – 'The
Sacrifice of Isaac' (1603)
Image: Wikimedia
Commons: [https://
commons.wikimedia.
org/wiki/File:Sacrifice_of_
Isaac-Caravaggio_\(Uffizi\),
jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sacrifice_of_Isaac-Caravaggio_(Uffizi).jpg)

How does the story unfold? What do you think God's purpose is when He asks Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac? What do you think of this?

2.2.2 HOW TO READ A BIBLICAL STORY?

💡 The Sacrifice of Isaac is not a regular biblical story. At first glance, it seems to be a dramatic story about a gruesome command from God. The Sacrifice of Isaac is part of the First Testament's first book: Genesis.

💡 In this story, God asks Abraham to sacrifice his only son, Isaac. Does God really want Christians to sacrifice people? If you read the story literally, it does seem that God commands people to do such horrible things. Yet, this is not the message or meaning of the story. It is important to always look for **the symbolic meaning of a biblical story**. You must look, think, and reflect beyond the words that are written down. Above that, you should not look for facts in biblical texts, but rather look at symbols that are used to express a vision of God, the world, and human beings.

💡 The Bible is a centuries-old book that is more than 2000 years old. Back then, the world was very different from the one we live in today. In order to understand a story from the Bible properly, it is important to have knowledge of the world of that era. After all, the world in which you live always influences your thoughts and actions.

What do you think was different about the world of Abraham and Isaac?



Figure 2.3
Video Clip

The stories of the First Testament were originated centuries ago in the culture of the Middle East. At that time, society was not global but strongly concentrated in rural areas, local cities, and small villages. Electricity had not yet been invented, nor had the internet. Industry did not exist, the people supported themselves economically mainly through agriculture and fishing, handicrafts, and trade. Christianity did not exist either. In general, religious life in the Middle East was characterized by polytheism. The term 'polytheist' refers to someone who does not believe in one god, but in multiple gods. The term 'polytheism' therefore refers to a religion with several gods. **All these elements had an impact on the Biblical stories.**

**2.2.3 DOES GOD
TRULY DESIRE HUMAN
SACRIFICES FROM HIS
BELIEVERS?**

Back to our story. In Genesis 22:1-19, we can read that God commands Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac. At that time, about 2000 years ago, offering a sacrifice to (a) God was common. People did this to appease the gods and to honor them. Abraham does what God commands. He goes to the land of Moriah with Isaac. On top of the mountain, Abraham is about to sacrifice his son to God.

Can we use this story to legitimize religious violence?

- Yes, God really wants Abraham to kill his son.**
- Yes, but only if God demands this from us.**
- No, because this story does not belong in the Bible.**
- No, this story criticizes violence in God's name by replacing Isaac with an animal at the end of the story.**

Why did you pick this answer?

STATEMENT. *“The Sacrifice of Isaac is a gruesome biblical story that approves human and child sacrifices.” Do you agree? Why?*

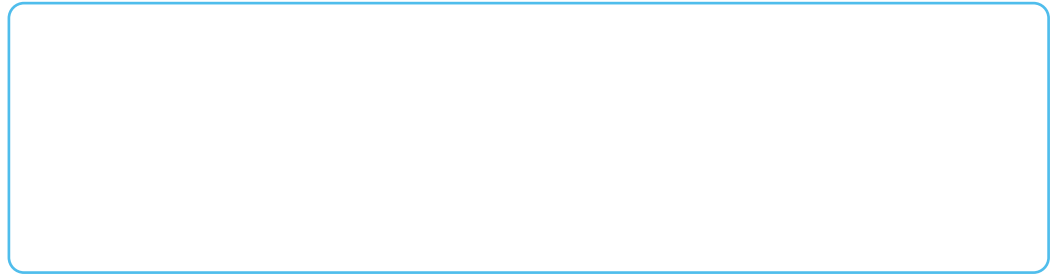



Figure 2.4
The sacrifice of Isaac
street art Brussels,
Belgium.
Source: Sparrow
via Wikimedia Commons,
Licensed under the
Creative Commons
[Attribution-Share Alike
4.0 International](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/)
The picture has not
been changed and
can be found at [https://
commons.wikimedia.org/
wiki/File:The_sacrifice_
of_Isaac_street_art_
Brussels_02.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_sacrifice_of_Isaac_street_art_Brussels_02.jpg)



 **The story of Abraham and Isaac does not approve of sacrifices at all.** For at the last moment, God stops Abraham, and He even provides a sacrificial animal (a ram). This is an important part of the story that shows that God resists human and child sacrifices. God does not want human sacrifices, because He does not want people to pay a price to secure His favors. The story criticizes sacrifices to God. **This story says that violence is wrong and can certainly not appease God.**

2.2.4 AN ALMIGHTY FATHERHOOD?

The message of Genesis 22:1-19 goes beyond the prohibition of human sacrifice. It is also an affliction of Abraham, an affliction that does not involve sacrificing Isaac but **teaching him to let go of his son**. God ultimately asks Abraham to sacrifice a ram. In ancient times, this animal was a symbol of masculinity, leadership, and violence. The story shows that Abraham is sacrificing power over his son instead of his son himself.

This is also being showed at the end of the story. Abraham leaves on his own, without Isaac. So, this story not only disapproves of human sacrifice but also says that children are not just the property of their parents. As a parent, you cannot just simply determine what will happen to your child. The ram that is eventually sacrificed is a symbol of masculinity and power. By sacrificing this ram, Abraham shows that as a father, he cannot and will not fully rule over his child.

The story of Abraham and Isaac has a double symbolic meaning, but which one? Indicate the correct answer.

- The story shows that God will always reward the sincerest believers. He therefore rescues Abraham's son, Isaac, and ensures that Isaac will always respect his father.**
- The story shows that God opposes human sacrifices and shows that a father must always continue to protect his son.**
- This story opposes human sacrifices. God does not want such things. He wants to make clear to Abraham that a father cannot fully rule over his child(ren).**
- The story shows a God who rewards and protects His faithful believers. In addition, it also wants to make clear that parents can always rule over the fate of their child(ren).**

2.3 OFFERING AN ISAAC SACRIFICE

What is an 'Isaac sacrifice'? In a symbolic reading of the biblical story about the Sacrifice of Isaac, we can wonder whether we sometimes still make an **'Isaac sacrifice'** nowadays. Sacrifices are part and parcel of life. They teach us to reflect upon ourselves. For believers, such an **'Isaac Sacrifice'** can cause them to question not only their image of humanity but also their image of God.

Have you ever had to offer an Isaac sacrifice? Explain.



Figure 2.5
Video Clip

Can you imagine that even today people sacrifice their lives, or the lives of others, for their ideals, like a god? What would you say or ask to these people?

2.4 GLOSSARY

Genesis

Genesis is the first book of the First Testament. 'Genesis' is Hebrew for 'in the beginning'. This Bible book tells the story of creation, the Fall, and the history of Israel. The sacrifice of Isaac can also be found in this Bible book. Genesis contains stories of faith and does not aim to give a factual or historical account of the creation of the world.

Isaac sacrifice

In a symbolic reading of the Bible story about the Sacrifice of Isaac, we may also ask ourselves whether we are making an 'Isaac Sacrifice' today. Sacrifices are part of life. They teach us to reflect upon ourselves. This is also called 'to bring an Isaac Sacrifice'. For believers, such an Isaac Sacrifice can cause them to question not only their image of humanity but also their image of God.

Middle East

The Bible, and thus the stories of the First Testament, originated centuries ago in the culture of the Middle East. All biblical stories are strongly influenced by the culture and the social life of the Middle East.

Jesus lived in the Middle East. That is why Christianity has its origins in this region. The Middle East has also contributed significantly to other developments in European culture, like for example, our alphabet, developments in agriculture, and so on.

The term 'Middle East' refers to the countries of Southwest Asia and some parts of North Africa, such as Iran, Iraq, Syria, Egypt, and so on.

Polytheism

The term 'Polytheist' refers to someone who does not believe in one, but in several gods. The term 'polytheism' therefore refers to a religion with several gods.

The Greeks and the Romans of antiquity, for example, were polytheists as they believed in different gods.

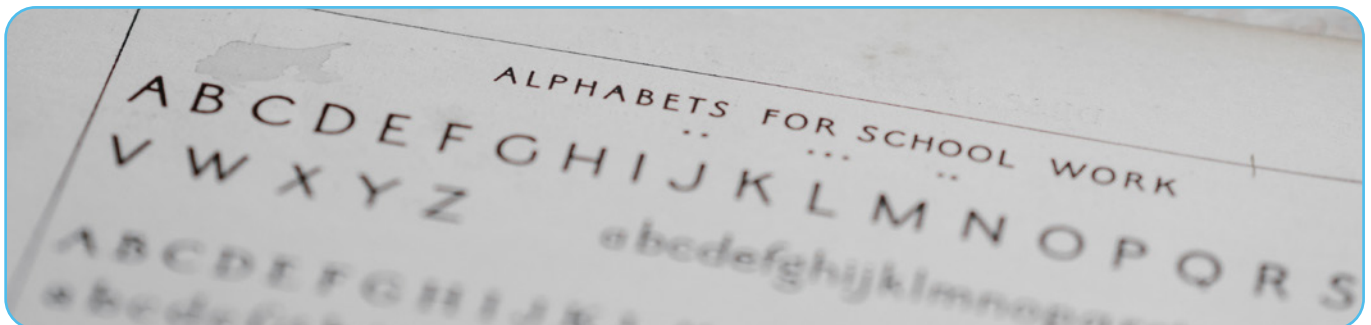


Photo: Annie Spratt | Unsplash

2.5 TRANSCRIPT OF THE VIDEO

1. EXT PLAYGROUND DAY

Michael, Pieter-Jan, Lindsay, Sarah and Ahmed are skating together. Suddenly, Michael slides out and bumps into Pieter-Jan, causing Pieter-Jan's skateboard to break, one wheel off (or something). Pieter-Jan gets angry, he thinks Michael did it on purpose.

Pieter-Jan: What did you do? You ruined my new skateboard!

Michael: I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to!

Pieter-Jan: Yeah, sure, like you're such a saint.

Michael: I'm really sorry, I crashed, I really didn't mean to ruin your skateboard.

Pieter-Jan: Whatever. As if a Catholic like you wouldn't react violently on purpose? You were just jealous of my skateboard.

Lindsay: Calm down, guys. Maybe we can still fix your skateboard?

Michael: I'm not jealous of your skateboard! And as a Catholic, I wouldn't use violence at all!

Pieter-Jan: Whatever. The Bible is full of violent stories. Like that one story, where a father kills his own son, also intentionally!

Michael: What? That's not true?

Ahmed: Relax, guys. Pieter-Jan, Michael didn't do this on purpose. And what story are you suddenly talking about?

Michael: Yes, I really didn't do this on purpose. And what kind of story are you talking about all of a sudden?

Sarah steps into the conversation

Sarah: I know what story you're talking about, the story of Abraham and Isaac! Wait let me use my new application so we can fact check it!

Sarah takes out her tablet and everyone takes a position to look over her shoulder. She opens an application named 'the vault of knowledge'. A short loading screen appears and then a screen with a search bar and a volume button appear. Sarah puts her finger on the volume button and a scan is done.

Application: Access to unlimited knowledge granted... Please ask your question... please ask your question...

Sarah: Can you tell us the story about Isaac?

We see the text bar getting filled with 'Story of Abraham and Isaac'. A search icon appears followed by a red exclamation mark.

Michael: What does that mean?

Sarah: It means the story has some dangers of interpretation. Let's go on.

Sarah clicks on the exclamation mark and the vault tells the story of Abraham and Isaac and shows illustrations

[BIBLICAL STORY, part 1]

In this section, the story of Abraham and Isaac is presented (voice-over application).

Genesis 22:2-9

And then God said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer Him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you."

So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him.

Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. The two of them walked on together [without the other young men]. Isaac said to his father Abraham, "Father! The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" [...] Abraham said, "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." [...]

When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar...

Returning to the students, they clearly look shocked and confused.

Michael: Huh?! Wait a minute... So, Abraham is ordered by God to sacrifice his only son?

Pieter-Jan: That's really crazy. What kind of God is asking such a horrible thing of one of his followers? What kind of God would that be? A God who purposely wants to do evil? Moreover, Abraham does not even seem to doubt God's command. Will he just do whatever God asks him to?

Michael: Can we really read such a terrible story in the Bible?!

Sarah: Let's get back to the story.

[BIBLICAL STORY, part 2]

Genesis 22:10-19

Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son.

But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven, and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" [...] "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me."

And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. [...]

EXT PLAYGROUND

Returning to the students, they look confused.

Michael: Wait, so Abraham doesn't kill his own son?

Pieter-Jan: But why does God give the order to kill Isaac first and then he saves him? I don't understand any of this.

Michael: What's the meaning of this story? How can we understand this story?

Sarah: Wait, there is a Frequently Asked Questions section on this story: let's check it out!

We see Sarah pushing the FAQ section and we see different questions appear:

Sarah: Look at all these questions: (reads aloud) 'How is it possible that a story like this can be found in the Bible?'

Ahmed: Yeah, I thought the Bible was like Jesus about love.

Sarah swipes left and another question appears

Sarah: (reads aloud a second question) 'Do people really attach importance to this story?'

Lindsay: I think the people who do are a bit sick in their heads, no?

Sarah (reads aloud the third question): 'Does God have the right to demand such things? To test people like that?'

Pieter-Jan: What kind of God asks a father to sacrifice his only son?

Sarah: Sure, but what kind of father is willing to sacrifice and kill his son without any kind of protest or hesitation? I mean since when is it okay to sacrifice human lives?

Lindsay: For me this is just proof that religion is irrational and dangerous, don't you think?

Sarah: Let's look at this one: 'Is the story of Abraham and Isaac still relevant today? Can we still get something out of this? Does this story still have a message for us?'

Sarah pushes on the question button:

Application: While some might use this story to do violence in the name of God, the deeper meaning of the story is actually to criticize just that. The story criticizes violence in God's name by replacing Isaac with an animal at the end of the story, violence is wrong and can certainly not appease God.

Pieter-Jan: Ah... man... religion can be so confusing sometimes...

Michael: Yeah I know... That's why violence in name of any God seems a bit crazy... The old text can be interpreted in so many different ways!

Pieter-Jan: Sorry I called your religion violent.

Michael: No worries, we learn each day! And don't worry about your skateboard my dad will fix that in no time!

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