

2



ENCOUNTER WITH SACRED TEXTS:
TEXTS OF VIOLENCE

MODULE TWO

TEXTS OF VIOLENCE

2.1 INTRODUCTION

2.1.1 STRUCTURE OF THE TEACHER'S BOOK

This teacher's book is a didactic package that elaborates on the following theme: 'the encounter with sacred texts: texts of violence'. It has been developed for the 12- to 18-year-old age group and offers the teacher or supervisor of a learning group the opportunity to develop this theme at the level of their class group.

In this book, the teacher can work around various topics that fit in with the overarching theme of 'the encounter with sacred texts: texts of violence'. Through impulses and didactic suggestions, it is possible to approach this theme from different perspectives. Impulses are elements that the teacher can bring into the classroom to start the conversation. This book contains a diversity of impulses with different levels of difficulty. These impulses aim to contribute to the learning process and exist in different forms. It is not the intention to use all impulses. The teacher can select the most appropriate impulses based on (the initial situation in) the learning group. The didactic suggestions are concrete proposals to get to work with the impulses and focus on philosophical reflection and communication. This allows the teacher to approach the different impulses in a varied way that suits a particular learning group.

This book makes a distinction between 'basic material' and 'deepening'. The basic subject matter is standard in the student's book and takes two hours to complete. In addition, the teacher has the choice to deepen the students' knowledge by means of the extra chapters with accompanying impulses and didactic suggestions, which are provided in this book.

The different chapters:

- In the first chapter, the Sacrifice of Isaac is discussed and interpreted symbolically. How can this intriguing Christian story be understood? Do the pupils themselves make something 'an Isaac sacrifice'? This chapter introduces the pupils to this biblical story and its underlying, symbolic meaning. This chapter is part of the basic teaching material for the pupils.
- The second chapter of this module is a deepening chapter. The biblical story is examined from the perspective of art. In what way has this story of Abraham and Isaac been depicted in art throughout history? The pupils learn to explain the Sacrifice of Isaac through art.
- The third chapter of this module is a deepening chapter. In the first chapter of this module, the pupils already encountered a symbolic interpretation of the Bible and its implications. The third chapter focuses on the consequences of a literal interpretation of the Bible through (biblical) fundamentalism.
- The fourth and final chapter highlights the contemporary relevance of Genesis 22:1-19. Is Isaac still being sacrificed today? This is a deepening chapter.

Finally, this teacher's book contains a glossary in which all difficult terms are explained concisely and at the level of the pupil. This is followed by a bibliography per chapter of this didactic collection.

**2.1.2 CONTENTS
OF THE
TEACHER'S BOOK**

This didactic package deals with the theme 'the encounter with sacred texts: texts of violence'. The chosen starting point is a Bible story from the First Testament: 'The Sacrifice of Isaac' (Gen 22:1-19). It offers students the opportunity to reflect on and deal with a violent text of the Holy Scripture. Does God really command people to commit violence in His name? Are biblical stories with violent content a legitimization for religious violence? How can Christians today properly read such Bible stories? Should we just ignore them, or even totally reject them?

The starting point of this book is a video clip enacting a potential real-world scenario from the daily life of the students. This visual fragment is a general introduction to the theme of 'sacred texts of violence' for the learning group, providing the teacher a basis upon which to develop the theme through one or more of the impulses and didactic suggestions prepared in this book.

2.2 THE SACRIFICE OF ISAAC (GEN 22:1-19): VIDEO CLIP

2.2.1 SCENARIO

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.



Figure 2.1
The Video Clip

After viewing the video clip, the teacher can start working with one or more of the impulses from this didactic package, following the level of his/her learning group.

2.2.2 QUIZ:
CORRECT ANSWERS

Several questions are introduced in the video clip and focus on the outcome and the concluding message of the story. Through these questions, the students will be stimulated to reflect on the content and meaning of the Bible story, and its various perspectives and dimensions. After watching the video clip, these questions can also be a starting point for a class discussion.

Question 1: How will the story unfold?

The first question is introduced to the students directly after the verses of Genesis 22:2-9 are shown in the video clip. In these Bible verses, Abraham was commanded by God to sacrifice his only son, Isaac. Together with Isaac, he goes to the land of Moriah. There, he builds an altar to sacrifice his son. At this moment, the video clip stops, and the viewer is asked to reflect on what happens next in the biblical story.

- Abraham kills his son Isaac but is overwhelmed by grief and guilt. In the end, he chooses to disobey the God who has caused him so much grief.
- Abraham kills his son Isaac and as a reward from God, for his obedience, he gets a happy and healthy life together with his wife.
- Abraham decides at the very last moment not to kill his son Isaac. What kind of God demands something like that? Abraham chooses his son and loses his faith in God.
- God stops Abraham at the very last moment. Abraham does not sacrifice his son Isaac, but a ram instead.

In the further course of the story, we read that God causes Abraham to end up sacrificing not his son, but a ram. Therefore, the fourth answer is correct. God intervenes and provides a sacrificial animal Himself. The sacrificial animal thus replaces the human sacrifice.

Question 2: Can we use this story to legitimize religious violence?

At the end of the video clip, the students reflect (individually) on the question above.

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

The fourth answer is correct. It is ultimately God who ensures that Abraham does not sacrifice his son, but a ram instead. God intervenes and provides the sacrificial animal Himself. In this story, an animal sacrifice replaces the human sacrifice. As a reader, it is important to look beyond the literal interpretation of the story. After all, a symbolic interpretation of Genesis 22:1-19 makes it clear that this story resolutely goes against human and child sacrifices. Quite the contrary, this story tells us that violence is not acceptable, and is certainly not needed in order to appease God.

2.3 THE SACRIFICE OF ISAAC (GEN 22:1-19): INTERPRETATION

2.3.1 EXTENDED VERSION OF THE BIBLE STORY GEN 22:1-19

[1] After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." [2] He 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." [3] 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. [4] On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. [5] Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you." [6] Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together. [7] Isaac said to his father Abraham, "Father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." He said, "The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" [8] Abraham said, "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So the two of them walked on together.

[9] 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, on top of the wood. [10] Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. [11] But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." [12] He said, "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." [13] 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. [14] So Abraham called that place "The Lord will provide"; as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided."

[15] The angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven, [16] and said, "By myself I have sworn, says the Lord: Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, [17] I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies, [18] and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice." [19] So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beer-sheba; and Abraham lived at Beer-sheba.

Source: NRSV, Genesis 22:1-19.

**2.3.2 SHORT VERSION
OF THE BIBLE STORY
GEN 22:1-19**

[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, Lannoo, 2017.

2.3.3 INTERPRETATION OF THE BIBLICAL STORY

The Sacrifice of Isaac (Genesis 22:1-19) is a story of the First Testament that leaves almost no one untouched. In the end, the reader is often left with many questions: what kind of God dares to ask a father to sacrifice his (only) son? Does God have the authority or the right to push people this far? How far are people willing to go for an ideal? Is this story not proof that religion is dangerous? Does this story lead to radicalization and fundamentalism? Moreover, Abraham seems to respond to God's command without any form of hesitation or protest. What kind of father is willing to kill and sacrifice his son? Where is Abraham as a father in this story? What kind of father is he? Does a parent have full right of disposal over their child?

"In summary, the story has two different meanings. On the one hand, the story shows that God does not want sacrifices at all, and certainly not human sacrifices. One should not think that he or she can influence God by making a sacrifice. On the other hand, this story shows that no one has a full grip on his or her future. At the end of the story, Abraham must let go of Isaac. The future is not a secured possession for Abraham, but a gift that he receives from God's hand with confidence." – First Testament scholar Paul Kevers

The story as an accusation against human sacrifices

To answer the above-mentioned questions while keeping in mind the biblical story, it is important to pay attention to the context in which the story takes place. If this is not considered, one risks falling into the trap of fundamentalism. The Bible is a product of its time and dates from a distant past. In other words, **there is a large (cultural) gap between the original and the contemporary audience of the biblical stories.**

The Sacrifice of Isaac is a story of the First Testament, which is more than 2000 years old. The Bible is a centuries-old book, written in the Middle East and in a world that is very different from ours. In order to understand a story from the Bible properly, it is important to have knowledge of the world of that era. Society was not global but strongly concentrated in rural areas, local cities, and small villages. Only a small part of the population was rich, and slavery was widespread. 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. Religious life in the Middle East was mainly characterized by polytheism. The term 'polytheist' refers to someone who does not believe in one god, but multiple gods. The term 'polytheism' therefore refers to a religion with several gods.

In Genesis 22:2, God commands Abraham to sacrifice Isaac: *“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.”*

In the culture of the Middle East, about two millennia ago, child and human sacrifices were not uncommon. Within the polytheistic context, the general cult of sacrifice had its origins in a magical notion of God. By making sacrifices, believers tried to get hold of higher powers or the gods. In this way they tried to keep away evil powers and vice versa they also wanted to invoke favors from good powers or gods. In the story of Isaac, we can also see that God asks Abraham to sacrifice his son. **However, we can wonder whether this God demands a human sacrifice.** The story wants to emphasize that the God of the Bible is elusive.

In Genesis 22:1-19, Abraham is ordered to make a sacrifice in the land of Moriah. Research of the historical critical exegesis has shown that Moriah was a symbol of a cult place where one could make an animal sacrifice to compensate for a child's sacrifice. In addition to the growing importance of monotheism, the conviction that God does not ask human sacrifice became increasingly important. Genesis 22:1-19 represents an important step in this understanding. The story conveys the following message: **God does not want human sacrifices at all, because he is a God of liberation.** It is ultimately God who ensures that Abraham does not sacrifice his son, but a ram instead. God intervenes and provides for the sacrificial animal. In this story an animal sacrifice replaces the human sacrifice.

As a reader, it is important to look beyond the literal interpretation of the story. After all, a symbolic interpretation of Genesis 22:1-19 makes it clear that this story resolutely goes against human and child sacrifices. Quite the contrary, this story emphasizes that violence against children is strictly forbidden. The God of the Bible does not want sacrifices, and certainly not child sacrifices or human sacrifices, or as theologian Paul Keevers stated: *“A man should not think that he can get hold of God by making a sacrifice.”* The story of Abraham and Isaac (Gen 22:1-19) is therefore not just a gruesome story from the Bible that approves of child sacrifices. The story is just a criticism on human sacrifice and child sacrifice. Essentially, this story tells that violence is not acceptable, and certainly not to appease God.

The story as an indictment of an omnipotent paternity

The message of Genesis 22:1-19 goes beyond the prohibition of human sacrifice. It is also a test for Abraham, which does not involve sacrificing

Isaac, but rather that he must learn to let go of his son. This interpretation can be seen in the last verse of the story: *“So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beer-sheba; and Abraham lived at Beer-sheba.”* Isaac’s absence is striking. Apparently, Abraham only goes to Beer-sheba with his servants. In this way it is made clear that Abraham has learned to let go of his son.

A **symbolic reading** of the story of Abraham and Isaac can thus be read as an **indictment of omnipotent fatherhood**. In the end, Abraham did not victimize his son, but the assumption that a father can dispose of his son, and that the son is absolutely possessed by the father. Being a father should not mean that you have complete control over your own child, or that you are omnipotent. The story just opposes the idea of an ‘omnipotent fatherhood’.

Abraham must learn to let go of his growing son rather than confiscate him. The ram that is eventually sacrificed is a symbol of masculinity and power. By sacrificing this ram, Abraham renounces the will to rule blindly over his child as a father. By letting go of Isaac, Abraham also learns to let go of his future. In this way, Genesis 22 also gives the message that a human being can never fully seize his future.¹ Man does not have his future in his hands, for it is given to him by God. In line with this we can also read the text with a critical reflection towards ourselves, because every human being sees himself at certain moments in life forced to bring an ‘Isaac sacrifice’.

Elsewhere in the Bible, too, the glorification of the blood bond between individuals is discussed. In other words, the Bible repeatedly gives the attentive reader the message that human fatherhood is not absolute. Matthew 10:34-37 brings the same kind of message:

“[34] Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.

[35] For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;

[36] and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household.

[37] Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me”.

¹ There is a clear link between Genesis 22 and Genesis 12. In Genesis 12 Abraham had to break with his past. In Genesis 22 with his future. In both cases he had to do this based on a great trust in God.

2.3.4 BRINGING AN ISAAC SACRIFICE



Figure 2.2
Image: © Kiwihug
Unsplash

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.

"The Sacrifice of Isaac is, of course, a text in which the Bible rejects the human sacrifice. But instead of seeing the story merely as a remnant of a 'primitive religion' in which God is portrayed as a cruel executioner, perhaps we can also read it as a strong demand for ourselves.

The malaise surrounding such texts is also determined by the way in which we, as contemporary humans, have begun to read this text. We often do this in a moralizing way but also very strongly from our own self-image. Reading this text of Genesis, you cannot help but rebel against God, yes to a fit of profound anger. In that sense the text also reveals our way of thinking about God. At certain moments in our lives we may have the impression that we must bring an Isaac sacrifice. We are touched in the most precious thing we have or are, in the sense of our life itself or in our expectation of the future. Then we rebel. Or sometimes we think we "have to" do something for God. And just then the promise disappears. God disappears. It raises a lot of doubts. We become disoriented. We lose the meaning of our lives. What image of God do I have? The image of an idol, a reflection of the harsh human society that lives on the principle 'do ut des'? Or perhaps it is about the image I have of myself: I always must do the most difficult thing (or be able to do). But why do I think that God necessarily asks me the most difficult, the most negative and the most impossible?"

Source: THOMAS, *Recontextualisering (Bijbelse achtergrond)*, <https://www.kuleuven.be/thomas/page/abel-recontextualisering/> (access 01.04.2020).

2.3.5 DIDACTICAL SUGGESTIONS

Interpretation of the Bible story: exploration

The pupils watch the video clip and read the Bible text. They reflect on the corresponding questions individually.

- In the text, indicate verses
 - that you do not like;
 - that surprise you;
 - that you do not understand.
- 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?

Interpretation of the Bible story: how to read a Biblical story?

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

Interpretation of the Bible story: does God truly desire human sacrifices from His believers?

- Can we use this story to legitimize religious violence? Why did you pick this answer?
 - 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.
- Statement: *"The Sacrifice of Isaac is a gruesome biblical story that approves human and child sacrifices."* Do you agree? Why?

Interpretation of the Bible story: an almighty fatherhood?

- 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).

To offer an Isaac Sacrifice

Together with the pupils, read the text of 'Thomas'. In a class discussion it can be discussed whether the pupils themselves ever had to bring such an 'Isaac sacrifice'. Can the pupils understand that people are willing to make certain 'sacrifices' in their lives based on their faith?

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



Figure 23
The Video Clip

2.4 ART

This book makes a distinction between 'basic material' and 'deepening'. This chapter can be used as 'deepening' by the teacher and is not part of the basic package.

2.4.1 BIBLICAL STORIES IN ART

Numerous stories from the Bible have been a source of inspiration for many artists for centuries. **Biblical stories are strongly anchored in European art history.** Artists depicted these biblical stories each in their own way, in sculptures, frescoes and paintings. In the past, these visual arts often had a didactic role in conveying Christian values and norms to a predominantly illiterate population. Commissioned by (church) institutions or individual art lovers, artists depicted various biblical scenes throughout the centuries. In museums and churches, for example, many different representations can be found of the story of creation, the Flood, the plagues of Egypt, the birth of Christ, the Crucifixion, and so on.

However, the combination of the Bible and art is no longer self-evident in the contemporary context. The ongoing processes of secularization and de-traditionalization make both young people and adults increasingly unfamiliar with biblical stories. This means that they are often no longer able to place or understand biblical art (history). They often have no idea what story and message are hidden behind a certain painting depicting a scene from the Bible.

For centuries, religion, the Catholic Church, and the Bible determined the artistic landscape in Europe. However, throughout the 20th century, art, culture, and religion grew further and further apart. On the one hand, the Church stuck to art from the past and did not keep up with new artistic developments. On the other hand, many Western artists, writers and film directors no longer clung to the Bible as a source of inspiration for their artistic work. The Bible was no longer the only or most important source of inspiration in the art world.

This is not to say that art and the Bible can no longer go together; the Bible remains a living source of inspiration with powerful and challenging stories. Art and the Bible can continue to stimulate each other at a time when these texts are less well known. They can keep provoking the imagination. Artists today are again cautiously looking for religious inspiration. Religion and religious themes are returning to art. Marc Delrue, priest and director of the Museum Moderne Religieuze Kunst (Museum of Modern Religious Art) of the diocese of Bruges, states the following in his book *Art and Spirituality*: *"In secularized society, Christian imagery appears in a totally unexpected context. Many artists see a religious dimension in their work but do not use traditional imagery for this purpose. It is fascinating to see how some deal with their roots in Christianity and with religious symbols, and this at a time marked by religious illiteracy and spiritual supermarkets."*²

² M. DELRUE, *Kunst en spiritualiteit*, Tielt, Lannoo, 2006, p. 82. This is the English translation of a Dutch quote: *"In de gesecculariseerde maatschappij verschijnen christelijke beeldmotieven in een totaal onverwachte context. Heel wat kunstenaars zien in hun werk een religieuze dimensie, maar gebruiken daarvoor niet de traditionele beeldspraak. Het is boeiend te zien hoe sommigen omgaan met hun wortels in het christendom en met religieuze symbolen, en dit in een tijd gekenmerkt door religieus analfabetisme en spirituele supermarkten."*

2.4.2 CARAVAGGIO - 'THE SACRIFICE OF ISAAC' (1603)

The Italian artist **Caravaggio**, or Michelangelo Merisi, was born in 1571 and died in 1610. He was one of the most famous artists of the Baroque period. His painting **'The Sacrifice of Isaac'** dates from 1603. He was probably commissioned by Cardinal Barberini, the later Pope Urban VIII (1623-1644).



Figure 2.4
Caravaggio – 'The
Sacrifice of Isaac' (1603),
via Wikimedia Commons:
[https://commons.
wikimedia.org/wiki/
File:Sacrifice_of_Isaac-
Caravaggio_\(Uffizi\)](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sacrifice_of_Isaac-Caravaggio_(Uffizi)).

The painting largely follows the storyline from Genesis 22 from verse 10 through 13. In the foreground of the painting we see an angel, Abraham, Isaac and the ram. These are all figures from this biblical story. Abraham is about to sacrifice Isaac to God with a knife that he is holding tightly in his right hand. With his left hand he grabs Isaac firmly. Isaac looks the viewer of the painting straight in the eyes and looks terrified. This gruesome scene contrasts sharply with the rustic landscape of the background.

As mentioned earlier, the painting largely follows the storyline of Genesis 22. However, the figure of the angel is depicted differently than in the biblical story. In the biblical story, God's angel speaks to Abraham from heaven. In the painting, on the other hand, the humanized angel physically grabs Abraham by the wrist, pointing to the ram that will be sacrificed instead of Isaac. In the Biblical story it is told that the ram with his horns was stuck in the surrounding bushes. Caravaggio, however, chose to place the ram's head right next to Isaac. The angel refers explicitly to this. In this way Caravaggio shows the viewer that a divine intervention prevents Abraham from sacrificing his son, Isaac. God is against violence and against human sacrifice. With this painting, Caravaggio also makes it clear that Abraham believes in God unconditionally, despite this heavy ordeal.

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

[11] But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am."

[12] He said, "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."

[13] 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.

Even today Isaac's sacrifice and Caravaggio's work of art from 1603 continue to inspire. In 2017 a mural based on the work of Caravaggio appeared in the Belgian capital Brussels. On the mural, as on the work of the Italian painter, we see a beheading with a knife. The resemblance with the work of Caravaggio is striking. However, the (controversial) mural from 2017 was not appreciated by everyone and caused a lot of controversy because it could incite violence.



Figure 2.5
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)

2.4.3 REMBRANDT VAN RIJN – 'THE SACRIFICE OF ABRAHAM' (1635)

Rembrandt Van Rijn (1606-1669) is a well-known artist from the Netherlands. The style of his paintings can be placed within the Baroque period. Rembrandt made frequent use of Second Testament subjects for his paintings, but stories from the First Testament, such as Isaac's sacrifice, also inspired him. In 1635 the painting **'The Sacrifice of Abraham'** appeared.



The painting clearly follows the storyline of Genesis 22. The following figures are depicted in the painting: Abraham, Isaac and the angel. The ram is absent. Abraham is about to sacrifice Isaac to God. He does not hesitate. We can see this in the way he is holding Isaac. He puts his hand firmly on Isaac's face to subdue him, but also to keep the knife hidden from him. However, an angel manages to stop Abraham in time. The knife, with which Abraham initially wanted to sacrifice Isaac with, falls. Unlike in the Bible story, the angel physically touches Abraham. Like

Caravaggio, Rembrandt emphasizes the divine intervention that prevents Abraham from murdering his son Isaac just in time. God is against violence and against human sacrifices.

Figure 2.6
Rembrandt Van Rijn –
'The sacrifice of Abraham'
(1635)
Image: Wikimedia
Commons: [https://
commons.wikimedia.org/
wiki/File:Rembrandt_-_
Sacrifice_of_Isaac_-_
WGA19096.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rembrandt_-_Sacrifice_of_Isaac_-_WGA19096.jpg)

**2.4.4 MARC CHAGALL
'THE SACRIFICE
OF ISAAC'
(1966)**

Marc Chagall (1887-1985) was a Jewish Russian artist. He was also inspired by the Bible story of Abraham and Isaac. Between 1960 and 1965 he worked in France on the painting: **'The Sacrifice of Isaac'**.

In his painting, Chagall follows the storyline of Genesis 22. The following figures are depicted in the foreground of the painting: Abraham, Isaac and the angel. Isaac lies naked in front of Abraham on an altar made of logs. Abraham is standing to his right and has a knife in his right hand. He looks up to heaven where he sees an angel descending towards him. The angel, just like in the Bible story, manages to stop Abraham just in time. After all, God does not want human sacrifices. The painting also depicts a ram hiding behind a tree.

Chagall added a few more figures to this painting in the background that are not mentioned in Genesis 22. On the left in the corner of the painting is Sarah, Isaac's mother. We can also find Jesus carrying his cross, which may be a reference to the story of Abraham and Isaac foreshadowing Christ's crucifixion.

2.4.5 DIDACTICAL SUGGESTIONS

The pupils look at the different paintings and answer the accompanying questions:

Summarize the story of Abraham and Isaac using one of the paintings. Please take the following questions into account:

- What is depicted in the painting?
- Which characters are depicted in the painting?
- What similarities and differences do you notice between the biblical story and this painting?

Let the pupils look for other works of art that take Isaac's Sacrifice as a starting point.



Figure 2.7
Image: © Amaury Salas
Unsplash

2.5 RELIGION AND FUNDAMENTALISM

This book makes a distinction between 'basic material' and 'deepening'. This chapter can be used as 'deepening' by the teacher and is not part of the basic package.

2.5.1 INTRODUCTORY THOUGHTS

A literal reading of the story can lead to the idea that the Jewish and Christian traditions approve violence in the name of God. KU Leuven research by Dirk Hutsebaut and Bart Duriez indicates that individuals who deal with religious content in a literal way tend more towards intolerance than individuals who look at the same religious content in a symbolic way.³ **On the other hand, a symbolic approach to faith, and thus also to the Bible, is often accompanied by a tolerant attitude towards people with different views and diversity.** In addition, Bible scholar Hans Ausloos states that a literal reading of the Bible, without making time for critical reflection, all too often leads to (biblical) fundamentalism.⁴

Not every form of fundamentalism is violent. Yet, Professor Ausloos emphasizes that a fundamentalist reading of the Bible can be dangerous and can lead to radicalization and violence. Amnesty International also warns against the consequences of extreme forms of fundamentalism that often conflict with universal human rights.⁵

In this module, we want to teach the pupils how to deal with belief and the Bible in a symbolic way. Concretely, this module goes deeper into one of the so-called 'texts of violence' from the Bible. This biblical text contains violent content and can be difficult to understand. A literal reading of a story like this could be used as a legitimation for (religious) violence. This module aims to draw young people's attention to the dangers of a literal religious experience and thus counter fundamentalist violence and radicalization.

³ D. HUTSEBAUT & B. DURIEZ, *Leidt godsdiens tot onverdraagzaamheid?*, in *Tertio* 87(2001).

⁴ H. AUSLOOS, *Geweld, God, Bijbel*, Averbode, Uitgeverij Averbode, 2019, p. 81-87, p. 96; H. AUSLOOS & B. LEMMELIJN, *De bijbel: een (g)oude(n) gids. Bijbelse antwoorden op menselijke vragen*, Leuven, Acco, 2017, p. 25-26.

⁵ AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL, *Godsdienst, geloof en mensenrechten*, <https://www.amnesty.nl/encyclopedie/godsdiens-geloof-religieuze-onverdraagzaamheid-en-mensenrechten> (access 01.04.2020).

2.5.2 WHAT IS RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM?

The term 'fundamentalism' is a complex and layered concept. In this section, we only talk about religious fundamentalism. However, it is important to always keep in mind that fundamentalist ideas can also originate outside religious frameworks.

Religious fundamentalism is a general term for religious movements that have a strict interpretation of a religion. These movements follow a strict and literal reading and interpretation of religious books and doctrines. There is always a strong loyalty to divine revelation, in which deviations from the rules are not tolerated. Fundamentalism is therefore characterized by binary thinking, leaving no room for critical reflection or nuance. Fundamentalist movements can be found in all religions. These fundamentalist movements can have a violent character. Yet, this should not be generalized. After all, not all fundamentalist movements are violent, such as, for example, Creationism in Christianity.⁶

2.5.3 WHAT IS BIBLICAL FUNDAMENTALISM?

Biblical fundamentalism is a movement within Christianity that interprets the Bible literally. Biblical fundamentalists underline that the Bible is the word of God; the result of His revelation. Therefore, according to them, there can be no errors in the Bible. In other words, they emphasize the 'infallibility' of the Scripture: *"There can be no doubt about the Bible, for this is the Word of God"*, according to them.

Biblical fundamentalists often read the Bible very selectively, without paying attention to the (original) context of Bible stories. Everything in the Bible is considered and accepted as historically correct and as fact. Moreover, no attention is paid to possible symbolic meaning(s) of Bible stories. Biblical fundamentalism therefore assumes a literal interpretation of the biblical contents.

"The Bible is anything but a divine recipe book to be slavishly followed. We are still confronted on a daily basis with the results of such a fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible. This kind of interpretation is still at the origin of much religiously legitimized violence and oppression. Nevertheless, we cannot ignore the fact that these texts, even if addressed to readers from centuries ago, have inspired people to untold numbers of good things of which we still reap the rewards. Even more so, critically read, as existential literature, they can still inspire people to deal with all facets of life: despair and suffering, love and happiness, adversity, and prosperity."

Bible scholars: Hans Ausloos and Bénédicte Lemmelijn⁷

⁶ More information: H. AUSLOOS en B. LEMMELIJN, *De bijbel: een (g)oude(n) gids. Bijbelse antwoorden op menselijke vragen*, Acco, Leuven, 2017, p. 44-58.

⁷ THOMAS, *Kritische lezing Bijbel*, <https://www.kuleuven.be/thomas/page/kritische-lezing-bijbel/> (access 02.04.2020). This is the English translation of a Dutch quote: *"De Bijbel is dan ook alles-behalve een goddelijk receptenboek, dat slaafs moet worden gevolgd. Met de resultaten van een dergelijke fundamentalistische interpretatie van de Bijbel worden we nog dagelijks geconfronteerd. Nog steeds ligt dit soort interpretatie aan de oorsprong van veel religieus gelegitimeerd geweld en onderdrukking. Niettemin kunnen we er niet omheen dat deze teksten, ook al zijn ze geadresseerd aan lezers van eeuwen geleden, mensen hebben geïnspireerd tot onnoemlijk veel goeds waarvan we nog steeds de vruchten plukken. Meer nog, kritisch gelezen, als existentiële literatuur, kunnen ze nog steeds een inspiratiebron zijn voor 's mensen omgaan met alle facetten van het leven: wanhoop en lijden, liefde en geluk, tegenslag en voorspoed."*

Summary:

- Biblical fundamentalism is a movement within Christianity that interprets the Bible literally. *“The Bible is literally true and there are no errors in it.”*
- The Bible cannot be doubted, for it is the Word of God.
- Everything in the Bible is (historically) true. No consideration is given to the possible symbolic meaning of the Bible stories.

2.5.4 DIDACTICAL SUGGESTIONS

Together with the students, search for the definitions of ‘religious fundamentalism’ and ‘biblical fundamentalism’.

Discuss the following statements with the pupils. The pupils indicate whether they agree or disagree and explain why they do/do not:

- *“Fundamentalist movements can only be found within religions. Only religious people can have radical thoughts.”*
- *“Fundamentalism is always accompanied by violence.”*

Assign the pupils, individually or in groups, to look for contemporary forms of biblical fundamentalism.

Assign the pupils, individually or in groups, to look for violent or non-violent forms of fundamentalist movements within Christianity.



Figure 2.8
Image: © Alex
Grodkiewicz | Unsplash

2.6 THE SACRIFICE OF ISAAC AS AN ACCUSATION AGAINST HUMAN SACRIFICE: IS THIS STILL RELEVANT TODAY?

This book makes a distinction between 'basic material' and 'deepening'. This chapter can be used as 'deepening' by the teacher and is not part of the basic package.

2.6.1 INTRODUCTORY THOUGHTS

The Sacrifice of Isaac is one of the most famous stories from the Bible. As a common ancestor of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, Abraham was and remains a man of world literature. He is still one of the most famous and important figures in our culture. The figure of Abraham is present in our language, literature, painting, music, sculpture, and so on. The importance of Abraham for our culture cannot be denied. The story of Abraham and Isaac (Genesis 22:1-19) has a long history and is more than 2000 years old. For this reason, we can ask ourselves the following question: can this ancient story still be meaningful to us today?

2.6.2 IS ISAAC BEING SACRIFICED AGAIN TODAY?

The biblical story of Isaac's sacrifice can be understood in the first place as an accusation of human sacrifice. However, talking about the sacrifice of people in the 21st-century seems very strange at first sight. The obviousness of human sacrifice in the culture in which the Bible story of Abraham and Isaac originated cannot be compared to the culture of our contemporary society. The reaction "*which religion requires human sacrifice from its believers?*" is not an unusual reaction for a person living in 21st-century society. Does this mean that there are no more human sacrifices today? Is Isaac being sacrificed today or not?

Even in our time and society, the biblical story about Isaac's Sacrifice remains relevant. People are still being sacrificed, as victims of abuse and violence.

This thought was visually processed by **Erik Ravelo**. He is a Cuban artist who developed a touching photo project that focuses on the abuse and violence inflicted on children today. This photo project was given the title '**Los Intocables**', which means '*The Untouchables*'. The Cuban artist's project consists of seven different photographs that together form an accusation of the abuse and violence of 'sacrificed' children. Based on the seven photographs, the artist shows seven situations in which, according to him, the fundamental rights of children are being threatened.

The title of the work *'Los Intocables'* refers to both the victims and the perpetrators. The children should be 'inviolable' because their right to a healthy and happy life should be protected. The perpetrators are 'untouchable' in the sense that they are often not punished and that injustice can continue without punishment. The photo series was part of **Benetton's 'Unhate' campaign**, a campaign that aimed to raise awareness of the right to have 'a childhood' and the awareness of that which threatens this right.

Typical for this photo series is the attitude of the children. Each child is depicted on the back of an adult as if the child were crucified. **The innocent children are thus depicted in the same way as the crucifixion of Jesus.** Not on a cross, but on their perpetrator. In this way Ravelo emphasizes that the perpetrators are responsible for the suffering of the children.

In this way, Ravelo wanted to frame the contemporary and sometimes gruesome reality of violence and abuse from a Christian perspective. In this way Christians believe that Jesus died on the cross for the sins of man. By suffering and dying on the cross, Jesus takes the place of these innocent victims. He fully identifies with the fate of the children and pays the price for the evil and sin that destroyed them.

The controversial work of art has provoked many reactions, both positive and negative. The campaign was even considered 'offensive' by Facebook for months. That's why Facebook even blocked Erik Ravelo's messages and page. But with the help of lawyers, the ban was eventually canceled.

**2.6.4 DIDACTICAL
SUGGESTIONS:
IS ISAAC BEING
SACRIFICED AGAIN
TODAY?**

How is Isaac being sacrificed today? This question can be discussed in a class discussion. Then, let the pupils look for examples of (religious) violence and abuse.

This class discussion can also be done based on Erik Ravelo's photo series. The pupils can see one of these photos and discuss it in class. Subsequently, the pupils can discuss the other photos individually or in groups. Or let the pupils, individually or in a group, choose a photo. The pupils search for and discuss the event this photo symbolizes and then present it to the rest of the class group.

2.7 GLOSSARY

In this glossary you will find more information and an explanation of certain concepts.

Note: The words marked with an asterisk () are also listed in the basic vocabulary list for students.*

Biblical fundamentalism

Biblical fundamentalism is a movement within Christianity. This movement reads and interprets the Bible in a literal way: *"The Bible is literally true and there are no errors in it"*. The Bible should not and cannot be doubted, because this is the Word of God. Everything in the Bible is true. No consideration is given to the possible symbolic meaning of the Bible stories.

*** 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.

*** The 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 'the 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.

Religious fundamentalism

The term 'religious fundamentalism' refers to movements within religions that have a strict interpretation of a religion. Religious fundamentalists have a strict and literal interpretation of religious books and rules of faith.

It is important to know that fundamentalist currents can be found in all religions. Moreover, not all religious fundamentalist movements are violent.

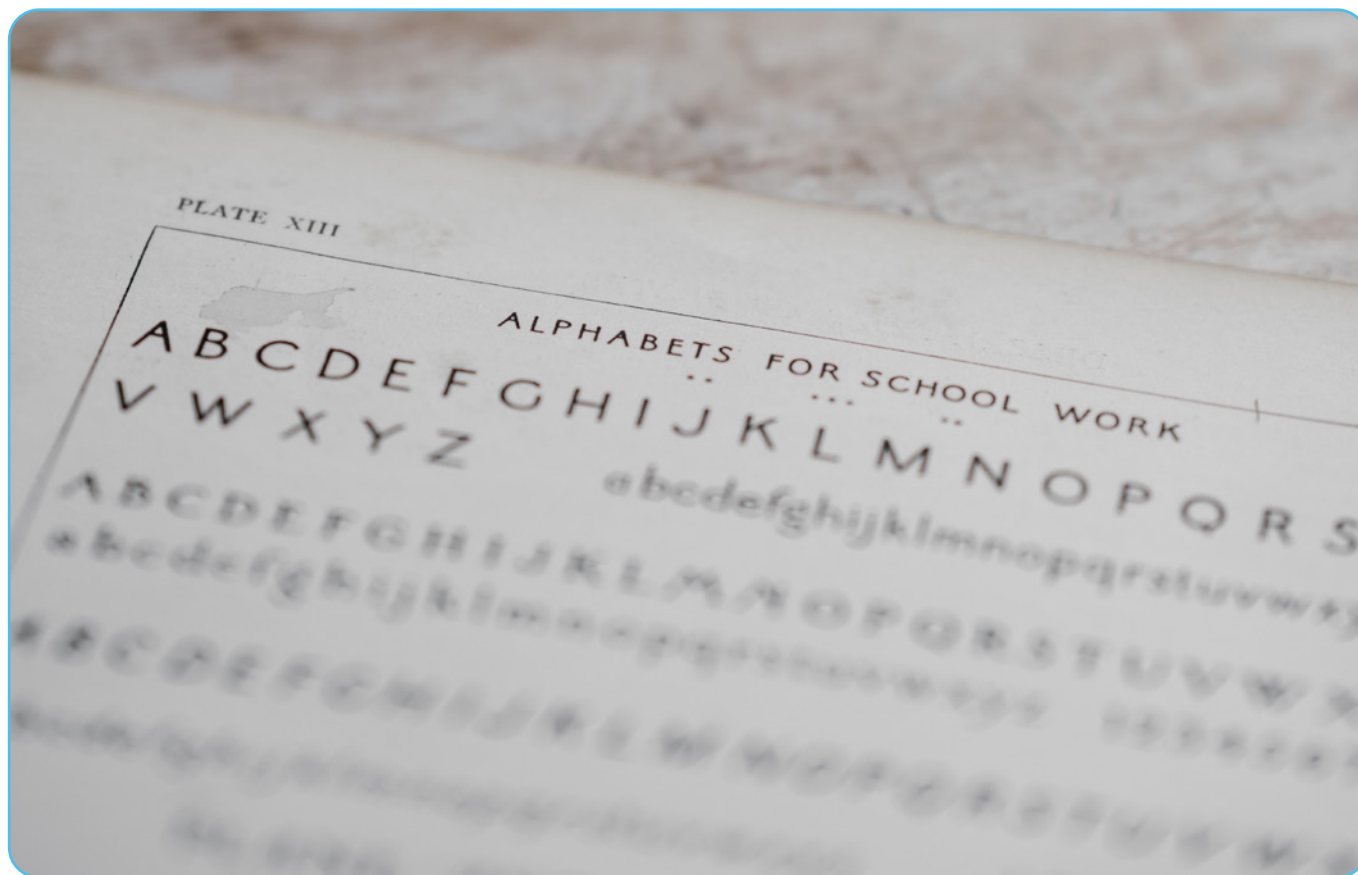


Photo: Annie Spratt | Unsplash

2.8 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 pupils, 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 pupils, 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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