



**UNION**

***Religious Worlds of New York • Curriculum Development Project***

## **The Binding of Isaac: From the Biblical Text to Your Neighbors' Lives**

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### **Abstract:**

This lesson plan is an exploration of Genesis 22:1-19, the story of Abraham's binding to God through his intended sacrifice of Isaac. Through the media of visual depictions, translations from Robert Alter's *The Five Books of Moses*, the New Standard Revised Version and the King James Bibles, and in a panel discussion of four guests from different Jewish and Christian faith traditions, students in my twelfth-grade English course "Reading Biblically" course will explore the way that different translations can significantly alter our understanding of a text. (The course is a semester elective). My objective in presenting the panel is that students will understand the way that faith traditions and individual choices can stem from readings of sacred text. A secondary, although no less significant goal, is to present students the idea that faith traditions still exist, even when we may not be aware of their presence in our community, and that they are worthy of inclusion in academic study. The student population of Lick-Wilmerding is racially and socio-economically diverse within the specific context of the San Francisco Bay Area; however, while issues of diversity are often discussed within the student and adult community, religion, both as an academic study and as a part of individual lives, is rarely included in these discussions.

### **Understanding questions:**

How can a story be interpreted in multiple ways?

How does the story impact people of different faith traditions?

## Day One:

Start with a See/Think/Wonder exercise<sup>1</sup> for:

Titian's *Abraham and Isaac*

Chagall:

Read the Alter translation; make a schematic of events as a whole class

Reading King James and Alter and NRSV versions of the binding story

## Homework:

2-3 page writing. Divide class into 3 groups. Each group is assigned one of the versions to write on:

Choose 2-3 words in each version of the story that seem significant in that version. Why are the words significant? Do they alter your understanding of the story? Do you see any differences in meaning among the various texts? Why is this story often referred to as “the binding of Abraham”?

## Day Two:

Whole class discussion sharing ideas from homework. Graphic organizer with bubbles for each version for students to take notes.

In pairs: discuss the significance of “tested” in Alter, “tested” in NRSV and “did tempt” in the KJV. (22:1)

Discuss the why “ram” might be used in Alter and KJV and “lamb” in NSRV

Writing: choose one of the versions to focus on. Reflect on the text: can you see the way in which this interpretation might inform the way someone might live his or her everyday life? You might want to think about devotions, beliefs or actions that are informed by this text.

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<sup>1</sup>[http://pzweb.harvard.edu/vt/VisibleThinking\\_html\\_files/03\\_ThinkingRoutines/03c\\_Cor\\_e\\_routines/SeeThinkWonder/SeeThinkWonder\\_Routine.html](http://pzweb.harvard.edu/vt/VisibleThinking_html_files/03_ThinkingRoutines/03c_Cor_e_routines/SeeThinkWonder/SeeThinkWonder_Routine.html)

### Prep for panel:

1. Review [AAR Guidelines for teaching religion](#) (“Religion, Education and the Constitution” 7-8).
2. Balancing civil dialogue with curiosity.
3. Review ideas about lived religion; also the concept that all religious traditions are internally diverse.
4. Drafting a few questions together and discussing what kinds of questions will be polite but still address what we are curious about.

### Homework:

Draft 2 specific questions, either about the panelist’s interpretation of a specific moment in the story and/or the way it holds implications for living a life within a religious tradition. Also, please read panelists’ biographies and descriptions of their congregations from their websites.

### Day Three:

Panel:

Contact: [Rabbi Camille Shira Angel](#) from Shahar Zahav a progressive Reform synagogue, established in 1977

<http://www.adathisrael.org/> : orthodox

Chabad? Rabbi Gedalia Potash

Episcopal: Mission District [http://www.saintjohnsf.org/about\\_clergy.htm](http://www.saintjohnsf.org/about_clergy.htm)

Pentecostal? Somewhere in the Excelsior

*Prepping Panel:* An email about the context of the class. A secular school, studying the Bible as literature. We have been studying the Abraham and Isaac story, looking at three different translations. In order to understand this story in the context of living faith traditions, we are inviting several members of different faith traditions within the Jewish and Christian worlds to talk about how they interpret the story and the implications for your daily life. Does your interpretation of the story impact the choices you make on a daily basis? If so, how? If not, why not?

If it’s possible, please bring in your copy of scripture and explain to students what version you use and if there are other versions that people in your tradition use.

## **Day Four**

### Debrief from Panel

Write:

1. What is something new, different, or deeper that you learned about the story or the act of interpreting the story?
2. What is something new, different or deeper that you understand about our panelists' living religion?

Talk:

Speed date

Read:

Either Wilfred Owen "Parable of the Old Man and the Young" or Osbert Sitwell's "Modern Abraham"

Discuss:

What meanings do we find in the text?

Given the context of WWI, what does this version of the story offer us?

### **Homework:**

Blog post: answering one of the questions (assign to each student)







## The Parable of the Old Man and the Young

(Wilfred Owen)

So Abram rose, and clave the wood, and went,  
And took the fire with him, and a knife.  
And as they sojourned both of them together,  
Isaac the first-born spake and said, My Father,  
Behold the preparations, fire and iron,  
But where the lamb for this burnt offering?  
Then Abram bound the youth with belts and straps,  
And builded parapets and trenches there,  
And stretched forth the knife to slay his son.  
When lo! an angel called him out of heaven,  
Saying, Lay not thy hand upon the lad,  
Neither do anything to him. Behold,  
A ram, caught in the thicket by its horns;  
Offer the Ram of Pride instead of him.

But the old man would not so, but slew his son,  
And half the seed of Europe, one by one.

## Suggestions for Further Development:

Read binding of Ishmael in Koran...bring in an Imam

Comparing the narrative quality of Koran with Hebrew and Christian

Fear and trembling: Kieerkagard: 4 midrash

Midieval mystery plays:

JPS tradition of the tanach

Modeling asking respectful and curious questions

Henry's emails to panel as a guide...

Idea of using stories as nexus for interfaith conversations...

Exodus and the power of that story in an African-American religious tradition

What about new testament stories that do that?

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