

# TESTAMENT

## NOTES FOR GROUP LEADERS

To accompany 'The Testament-the  
Bible in Animation' DVD

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## INTRODUCTION

These notes are designed as an aid to those who are leading group discussions on the Testament animation series. They are not intended to be an exhaustive discussion of every aspect of each story, and users should feel free to adapt – or add to – the material provided. Because the material is not designed to be used "cold", it is important that group leaders prepare well for each session, with the needs and composition of the group in mind. Each story is dealt with as a separate chapter which is divided into four sections:

1. Introduction
2. Background
3. Things to think about and discuss
4. Things to do

In preparing this material, we are conscious that it may be used with a wide variety of people, some of whom belong to the Christian faith and some who do not. While we recognize this diversity, we are equally conscious of the need to demonstrate that these stories are rooted in the experience of the community of faith, and that they make assumptions about the nature and action of God which are consistent with Judaeo-Christian tradition. Those using this material should be aware of this dimension and tailor the material to the needs of their group.

It will be evident that the stories themselves are very old, yet they do touch on some immediate, universal human experiences. We are aware that, in the third section of each chapter, people may begin to confront sensitive, personal issues in their lives. It is important that group leaders prepare particularly well for this aspect of a group discussion, and allow group members to participate as much – or as little – as they like. Above all, it is important that no one feels under pressure to talk about areas of their life which they find difficult. It may be helpful to have someone (or better, two people, one of each sex) available to talk through any particular problems that people may encounter. We have been careful to frame the questions in an open-ended way. We hope that this will enable people to understand that there are no right or wrong answers to the questions posed.

We have tried to avoid theological jargon and abbreviations. The only exception is the use of BCE in dates, to denote "Before Common Era".

## **CREATION AND THE FLOOD**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Have you ever created a work of art – a piece of music, a painting, a sculpture or sat down to do some serious writing? If you have, you will know that the enterprise requires a great deal of thought and preparation. Often, a work of art is a long time in formation in the mind of the artist. Many composers, for example, say that they start to write a piece because it is "burning away" inside them, and they have to get it down on paper and hear it being performed. Hearing – or seeing – the final results of artistic creativity is means by which the artist can communicate with others, and help others to see something of his or her personality in what has been created.

The opposite side of this experience, however, is for an artist to see his or her work of art being misused or ruined. A composer can go as far as writing the notes; he or she must then hand the score over and trust others to take it a stage further and perform the notes. The result can be good or bad, it can be what the composer really intended or something completely different. It can bring the composer joy or untold disappointment.

These complex experiences are budding away under the stories of the Creation and Flood.

#### *BIBLICAL PASSAGES*

Genesis 1—3 and 6—9.17

### **BACKGROUND**

The biblical account of the Creation is really two stories (Genesis 1—2.4a and 2.4b–25). Most scholars now agree that these two stories come from different strands of ancient tradition. In some respects are similar to the ancient creation stories of Israel's near neighbours (particularly Babylon, which also has a story of a flood), and it is generally the case that all ancient near-eastern cultures had their own accounts of how the world came to be made. There are, however, important differences between the biblical accounts of Creation and those of other cultures.

God creates because he wants to do so, like an artist wanting to communicate and show something of his personality.

God is the ultimate Creator, and no other forces exercise control over him. Compare this with the Babylonian accounts of Creation, where the god, Marduk, puts the sun, the stars and the moon in their place, but they exercise power over him.

God creates human beings in his own image. There is no distinction of status between the man and the woman, only a strong sense of mutuality and complementarity. In the creation stories of other cultures, it is only the kings and the ruling classes that are made in the image of the gods.

The episode about Adam and Eve introduces the moral dimension to the account of the Creation. God made man and woman, and gave them freedom within his world; but freedom leaves them with the choice to behave responsibly or irresponsibly, and to receive goodness or evil as a result of their actions.

In the Bible, names were highly significant. Adam means "mankind", but also has its roots in the Hebrew word for soil, "Adama". The man was created from the earth. Eve means "life". She is made from Adam's rib, suggesting mutuality.

The serpent is often thought to be the devil, but this would be to misunderstand the original intention of the writers. At the time the Creation accounts were written, the serpent was simply seen as another creature who was used for moral failure, not to personify evil.

The account of the Flood takes the moral theme a stage further. If there are consequences for abusing what God has created, and making it into something he never intended, then there are consequences to be faced. Like the Creation stories, many of Israel's neighbours had stories about floods, but they, too, differ significantly from the accounts in the Bible.

In the Bible, it is clear that the Flood comes as a result of human wickedness. In other flood stories, it happens because the gods are irritated because humankind is too noisy!

When the floods recede in the biblical story, God makes a solemn promise to humankind never to flood the earth again. In other stories about the flood, the survivors are either turned into gods or promised immortality.

The rainbow which signals the end of the Flood, looks like the bow of an archer, turned away from the earth. It is a symbol of peace and reconciliation between God and humanity.

## **THINGS TO THINK ABOUT AND DISCUSS**

1. Think of a time when you spent a long time in "conceiving" an idea, and how you felt (excited, daunted, etc.). Then think of the process of making the idea real (was it an object, a piece of music, a business plan, etc.?)

What did it feel like to see your work come to fruition?

How did it impact upon your relationships with other people?

2. Have you ever seen your work or best-laid plans ruined by others?

Were you undermined by someone else, or was your trust betrayed?

How did you feel?

How did you respond to the people who had caused you such pain and disappointment?

3. Have there been times when you have had to face the consequences of your own actions?

Did it involve suffering or loss of any kind (freedom, friends or general well-being)?

How did this experience enable you to change the way you related to other people, or the way you viewed the world?

## **SOMETHING TO DO**

1. In the biblical story of the creation of woman, the Hebrew word used to describe the work God did is the same word that is used to describe hard, physical work.

Can you think of something that has been forming in your mind for some time, and which you have put off doing because of the effort involved?

Perhaps now is the time to try (in the garden, the house, etc.) and discover how costly creation is, and how it requires us to expend ourselves fully.

2. The ark was a place of safety and became a symbol of God's desire to rescue his people.

Try to design a box or chest into which you can put things for safe keeping. Then make a list of all the things which you think it is important to keep safely.

What are the reasons for your choices?

## **ABRAHAM**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Over the past few years, growing numbers of people have been tracing their "family trees". This is perhaps especially true of people whose parents, grandparents or great grandparents were born in another country. For example, it is quite common for local newspapers in Britain and Ireland to carry letters from people in the USA, asking for information about their ancestors who once lived in the area. It seems that we are becoming aware of the need to know who we are, who we belong to, and where we've come from.

If we are fascinated by our past history, we are equally excited – and apprehensive – about the future, especially if it involves moving on, going somewhere unknown, or doing something which goes against all our basic instincts.

These are some of the experiences that are present in the story of Abraham, along with a willingness to trust against all the odds, which is why it has been and still is one of the central stories for Jews and Christians.

#### *BIBLICAL PASSAGES*

*The call of Abraham:* Genesis 11.31—12. 9

*God's promises to Abraham:* Genesis 12.2, 13.14–18, 15.1–2, 17, 22.17–18

*The three visitors:* Genesis: 18.1–15

*Ishmael:* Genesis 16, 21.8–12

*Sodom and Gomorrah:* Genesis 18.16—19.29

*The birth of Isaac:* Genesis 21.1–8

*God's command to Abraham:* Genesis 22.1–19

### **BACKGROUND**

Because the story of Abraham is very old, it is not easy to say exactly when it took place. Scholars of the Bible, ancient historians and archaeologists differ among themselves about the historical period in which the events are set. One possible suggestion, provided by archaeological work undertaken in the 1920s and 1930s which helps us to understand much about the city of Haran and its people, is that the story might be set during the early part of the second millennium BCE, possibly between 1900–1800 BCE.

The historical setting, however, is not the most important feature of the story. More important is the fact that the story has been told from the very beginning, in families and whole communities, being carefully handed down from generation to generation, before it was eventually written down. This alone suggests that Abraham continued to be hugely significant in the on-going story of faith. He is frequently referred to in the Scriptures of Jews and Christians, often being called the "father of faith".

In many respects, Abraham stands for all that is new and unexpected in our encounters with God. Here are significant ways that this happens in the story:

- He left Haran, his ancestral home, (was unheard of at the time) so that a new nation of people be created in a new place.
- Abraham shows us that this new place can bring about new life. His wife, Sarai, was unable to conceive a child in her "old" life in Haran. It was only when they settled somewhere new, that she gave birth to a son, Isaac.

- He shows us the importance of looking forward, rather than clinging on to the past. Those who look back to an old way of life, like Lot's wife, are unable to live for the future.
- He shows us the importance of trust. In the dark and disturbing episode, when Abraham is told by God to sacrifice his son Isaac, he is prepared to do the unthinkable in order to show God's total commitment to all human beings, who are made in his image.
- The story as a whole is the account of a journey, of movement from one place to another. It shows that it is important for those who belong to a religious faith to know where their roots are, and to understand how they have moved on from something old to something new.

## TO THINK ABOUT AND DISCUSS

1. One of the reasons why Abraham is called the "father of faith" is because he realised that God's call involves change. In Abraham's case this meant doing things that were considered unusual at the time: leaving his native land and the security of home, relatives and protection in old age; taking all the risks associated with travel (which included the threat of wild animals, attack by enemy nations, the lack of food and water etc.); and establishing a new way of life in a strange country.

Would you agree that religious experience involves change or is it only a matter of agreeing to ancient traditions?

What is your own experience, especially where religious faith has involved a major change in your life?

2. The one aspect of the story that people find disturbing is Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son, Isaac. Some scholars have suggested that one of the reasons why Abraham left Haran was because most people there worshipped other gods and that human sacrifice was part of their worship. It may be that God was specifically calling Abraham away from this form of religion, to discover that he is not a blood-thirsty monster who needs appeasing, but the true God who invites us to trust him.

What do you make of the fact that Abraham's trust in God was so strong, that he was even prepared to kill his own son – and only then discovered something new and unexpected?

The Mad Hatter in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* said that "faith means believing six impossible things before breakfast" Soren Kierkegaard, the twentieth-century Danish philosopher, said that it is "like walking out for the first time on to fifty thousand fathoms of water, and discovering that you can swim". Which statements best sums up for you what it means to trust God – and why?

3. Children are an important feature of many Bible stories. A woman who gave birth to many children was seen to be favoured by God; and a man would wish to have many sons so that the family name would live on for many generations. However, children, like women, were not given equal status with adult men in Jewish communities. Not until a boy was 12 or 13, and celebrated his barmitzvah, was he considered fully part of the community of faith.

Although the events of the story of Abraham happened a long time ago, they are relevant to our own time, not least when children are becoming increasingly vulnerable

in our society. What can the whole story of Abraham teach us about the value of children?

What does it tell us about the value and equality of all human beings who are created in God's image?

### **SOMETHING TO DO**

1. If you have got a photograph album, containing snapshots which tell the story of the significant times in your own life, and in the lives of other members of the family, take time to look through it. As you do, you might like to reflect on these questions:

What are the "key" moments in the story so far (births and deaths, a new home, a new job, getting married, how people seem to have grown older etc.), and how have these moments affected your life?

What changes can you see in your own life – do you feel these have been for the better or worse?

Is there anything that the story of your own family can tell you about yourself, and what your own future might be?

What would you like the future to bring to your own life, and how might this require you to change?

OR

2. You might like to think of drawing up your own "family tree". As you do this, you might also like to consider the questions in (1) above.

# MOSES

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, we have grown used to hearing stories about kidnapping, hijacking and hostage-taking on the news. We are also aware that, all over the world, people are trying to live and work in countries which are not their native homes. Often, these people have to live with abuse, prejudice and, in some circumstances, persecution. In many of the world's countries, today, immigrants and refugees are often the poorest and weakest members of society, and are denied basic things which we take for granted, like reasonable housing, education, jobs and an income.

It is not easy for us to go back thousands of years in time and understand what conditions were like for the Hebrew people living in Egypt, but many modern-day news stories (about the Kurds in Northern Iraq or about different ethnic groups in Bosnia for example) may offer us a small glimpse of the strain under which many of them were living, working as slaves for a foreign power.

We often find that in extreme circumstances a charismatic figure appears from within the persecuted community, a hero, who will give hope to the people and finally lead them to freedom. Moses was such a figure in the ancient Hebrew community. Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther King are people from our own time who have brought about change and renewal for people suffering injustice.

### *BIBLICAL PASSAGES*

*Moses' birth: Exodus 2.1–10*

*Moses escapes to Midian: Exodus 2.11–25*

*The burning bush: Exodus 3.1—4.31*

*Pharaoh and the plagues: Exodus 6.28—11.10*

*The escape: 12.1—14.31*

## BACKGROUND

The Hebrew people had been led from Canaan into Egypt by Joseph (for details see p. 14). Since that period (probably around 1750 BCE) they had flourished as a community, until a new pharaoh ascended the throne of Egypt. Any new ruler would have been sensitive to the fact that Egypt was vulnerable to attack from nations near the Nile Delta and the upper regions of Egypt (which included Canaan). He would also have known that, if an invasion did take place, the Hebrew people living in Egypt might have welcomed the invaders. The solution was to round the Hebrews up and reduce them to slaves. This would reduce the threat of rebellion and invasion and provide the new pharaoh with a labour force for his new building projects.

It is difficult to date the events in the story of Moses with absolute certainty. A combination of archaeological and historical evidence suggest that, at the time when the Hebrew people were slaves, the pharaoh could have been either Rameses II (1290–1224 BCE) or his father, Seti 1 (1303–1290 BCE). At the time when the Hebrews escaped Egypt through the Red Sea, it is thought that the pharaoh was Merenptah (1224–1214 BCE).

The story of the Israelites' escape from Egypt has been fundamental to Jewish identity throughout history, because it shows that God hears his people and never abandons them. This is particularly significant when you consider that the Jews, as a race, have been extremely vulnerable to persecution throughout history, even in the 20th century.

These are some of the significant moments in the story of Moses.

- We see how some of the weakest and most insignificant people of the time (such as Miriam and Moses' mother) were able to disrupt the plans of Pharaoh, the most powerful man in Egypt.
- God chooses the most unlikely characters to lead his people. The Bible describes Moses as being reluctant and ill-equipped to be a leader. Many later stories of biblical leaders (particularly prophets) similarly stress their reluctance.
- There are significant moments in life when we catch a glimpse of God, and these become life-changing events. Moses' encounter with the burning bush is an example of social, political and religious development. He not only discovers something new about the nature of God, he is also sent back to Egypt to perform a political task which will ultimately lead to social change.
- In the end, we discover that persecution and injustice towards God's people will not last for ever, and that they will be rescued from their plight. The escape from Egypt through the Red Sea (known as the Exodus) is the first sign in the Bible that God delivers his people from oppression.

## **THINGS TO THINK ABOUT AND DISCUSS**

1. The Hebrew people believed that God had chosen them as his own nation. They were not a significant military or political force, and had often been governed by some fairly dubious characters. Yet, even though the Hebrew people were weak, God chose them. Similarly, Moses' credentials as a leader were doubtful, and he did not have the full support of the people at first.

Compare this with the way we might go about interviewing and selecting someone for a job, today; or the way we might rate a nation's value. What does this tell us about our willingness to put a price tag on a country's importance, or to divide people into successes and failures?

2. In recent times, we have been able to discover what imprisonment and freedom meant for a number of individuals who were taken hostage in the Middle East: Terry Waite, John McCarthy and Brian Keenan, to name three. All three have spoken about the way in which imprisonment and oppression can cause such deprivation that it reduces you to nothing and destroys your personality.

Are there times when you have lived with a personal experience of "imprisonment" (at school, in a difficult relationship, illness or work)?

What effects did this have on your capacity to be yourself. And, when you began to sense that you were beginning to break out of this experience, what did "freedom" mean and how did it come?

3. There is an old story, told by the rabbis long after the events of Moses' life, that says the waters of the Red Sea didn't begin to part until the first person jumped in and started to cross.

Are there times in your life when you have had to "take the plunge" in order to create enthusiasm or support for something or someone?

What did it feel like: did it boost your self-confidence or leave you feeling vulnerable and uncertain?

Are you glad that you took the lead?

## THINGS TO DO

1. Every year, the Jewish community celebrates the escape of the Hebrews from Egypt with a meal at the festival of Passover. It is called this, because they believe that God "passed over" their homes when the plagues came and destroyed the Egyptians. The meal had to be prepared quickly, and there was no time to wait for the dough to "rise" before they cooked the bread. Today, Jewish people still eat unleavened bread at the Passover, to recall the night when their forebears hurried to escape from the Egyptian armies.

When you are next in the supermarket, try to look out for different kinds of unleavened bread (e.g. pitta or naan). Do you know which countries they come from? You might like to try baking two different kinds of bread (leavened and unleavened), and discover how different they are.

2. Moses was the hero of the Hebrew people because he led them to freedom.

Who are your heroes? Try to collect photographs and pictures of them (they may be members of your family, friends, football players, musicians, etc.) and put them in a scrap book. Can you say why each of them is a hero, and what this person has done for you?

## JOSEPH

### INTRODUCTION

Many people dream of winning the national lottery jackpot, believing that it will be the answer to all their problems – particularly if they are not financially well off. Many people think that dreaming of better times is a hollow escape from reality. They are accused of behaving like children who imagine that they are going to be great politicians or record-breaking athletes.

However, we all have dreams. Sometimes they are pleasant, at other times they frighten and disturb us. Often, we believe they are significant.

The story of Joseph is one of a number of stories in the Bible where dreams play an important role. All ancient cultures, particularly in the East, attached great significance to dreams and visions, particularly as a means of discovering the will of God.

#### *BIBLICAL PASSAGES*

*Joseph and his brothers:* Genesis 37.1–36

*Joseph and Potiphar:* Genesis 39.1–21

*Joseph in prison:* Genesis 39.22–40.23

*Joseph and Pharaoh:* Genesis 41.1–57

*Joseph and his brother reconciled:* Genesis 42–46.7

### BACKGROUND

Joseph was one of the twelve sons of Jacob (the grandson of Abraham and Sarah, see p. 8). Jacob displayed considerable favour towards Joseph, which would have been unusual in ancient Near-Eastern cultures, because it was the eldest son who would have been liable for a double-inheritance on the death of the father. The very fact that Jacob appeared to favour Joseph over and above his elder brother Reuben, would have made the other brother suspicious that Joseph would inherit his father's wealth. According to earlier biblical accounts, Jacob had himself tricked his elder brother out of his inheritance. This explains the brothers' treatment of Joseph.

There is very little source material in the biblical story of Joseph which allows us to date it with any certainty. Usually, the Hebrew biblical writers mentioned the names of rulers of other nations, but here we only have reference to a pharaoh, with no name attached. Of the names that are mentioned, Potiphar (Joseph's master), and Asenath (who is given in marriage to Joseph by the pharaoh) were common Egyptian names between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries BCE. Added to that, there is a reference to a chariot in the biblical story (see Genesis 41.43) which suggests that the horse had been introduced into Egypt. This happened after the Hyskos invasion (a mixed-race invasion, including Hebrew speakers) who captured the Delta region and parts of upper around 1730 BCE. However, scholars are no means agreed on these dates and there are strong claims for a date in the fourteenth century BCE.

The story of Joseph is essentially one of good coming out of affliction, but this happens in a story full of ironic twists and turns.

Here are some of the themes in the story.

- There is no attempt to hide the reality of family jealousy; and, in his relationships with his brothers, Joseph is shown in both a good and a bad light.

- The apparent disaster of being left in a pit, and Jacob's grief at what seems to be the death of his son, was ultimately a way to a new and better life for Joseph.
- Joseph is portrayed as a fallible human being, rather than a super-hero, particularly in the episode about Potiphar's wife.
- While he was with his brothers, his dreams aroused his brothers' jealousies and landed him in trouble. In prison, however, they proved to be a ticket to freedom and further success.
- We are shown that life's experience (good or bad) can help a person to grow. Throughout the story we can see how Joseph progressed from being a "brat" into a rounded, forgiving person.

## TO THINK ABOUT AND DISCUSS

1. We are often suspicious of dreams, and dismiss them as an escape into fantasy. For the writers of the Bible, however, dreams were an important part of life, especially during periods of difficulty. It was a way of looking forward to a better future which they believed God had promised them.

There is an old Hebrew proverb which says "Those who expect little dream little, those who dream little do little, and those who do little receive little". Would you agree that there is value in dreaming of a better future, and that it is only those who dream of the impossible who can achieve what seems impossible?

2. Joseph's real greatness only came to be seen after all the difficulties of family jealousy, slavery and prison.

What would you say to parents who are keen to shelter their children from the hard lessons of life?

If you are a parent, how easy do you find it to treat your children equally?

3. Joseph rose to a position of great leadership, despite the fact that he had fallen from grace and been imprisoned.

In our national life, we tend to deride politicians who have failed in their private or professional life, or who have a less than glowing past history. What can the whole story of Joseph teach us about the need to be forgiving, as well as recognizing the gifts and abilities of people?

## SOMETHING TO DO

1. Try to listen to a recording of Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. As well as enjoying the music, see how the story develops. Are there different emphases from the way the story is told in the film?
2. Have a good look at the clothes in your wardrobe. Are most of your clothes for everyday use, or do you have lots of colourful occasional outfits. Do you have a favourite colour? What might this tell you about yourself?

# RUTH

## INTRODUCTION

Much has been said about the importance of family values in our society, but these values have rarely been spelt out. The story of Ruth is a practical demonstration of caring concern, love and loyalty which shows some of the best things about families. It is a love story -not of the hearts and flowers variety, but the story of people who reflect the love of God in their dealings with other people.

The story of Ruth reflects all that is best about human relationships. Ruth's commitment is not without its cost; she has to endure loss, poverty and the experience of being a foreigner in a hostile country, but her loyalty is rewarded and the family's future is secured.

At a time when people are often encouraged to think primarily of themselves, it is refreshing to read a story which still speaks to us today about people caring for and helping one another.

### *BIBLICAL PASSAGE*

*The book of Ruth*

## BACKGROUND

The story of Ruth is set in the violent times of the judges, before the Israelites had a king. The judges not only led the Israelites in battle but also ruled their area. It was a time of uncertainty as the Israelites did not have a firm hold on the land they occupied. It was also a time when Israel turned away from God. The book of Judges records the events of the time. The book of Ruth was not written at this time, as we can see from the mention of Ruth and Boaz's descendants and by the way the writer feels the need to explain the custom of taking off a sandal to seal a bargain, which was obviously not current at the time of writing. However, the setting is clear, and with this violent background, the impact of the peaceful and gentle story of Ruth is even more deeply felt.

One of the main themes of the book is that of promises which are made and kept. Ruth, in her moving speech, promises to stay with Naomi, despite the hardship this will cause her as a foreigner with no means of support in her adopted country. In making this promise Ruth realizes that it may mean giving up those things which she might otherwise enjoy – the closeness of her own family, familiar surroundings, the possibility of remarriage and children. Ruth is not required to do so much for her mother-in-law, but acts out of love and loyalty.

Boaz too makes a promise – to look after Ruth. Close relatives had an obligation to take care of widows or poor members of the family, but Boaz goes beyond his duty, recognizing Ruth's goodness and care for her mother-in-law. Boaz honours his promise by marrying Ruth, thus ensuring that she would be provided for, that Naomi would be cared for in her old age, and that the family name would continue.

God's promise is important in this story. Throughout the story the characters recognize that God is in control, even when, like Naomi, they don't understand the way in which he appears to be dealing with them. God kept his promises because his people kept their promises to one another, going beyond the demands of the Law. Through this God's

promises come true and Naomi, Ruth and Boaz are all rewarded for their trust and faithfulness.

It was very important to the Israelites that the family line should continue. The Law stated that marriage should take place between a childless widow and her dead husband's brother (or nearest relative). The first son of the marriage would be counted as the son of the dead man, and so the family line would continue. This is the law to which Boaz refers (Deuteronomy 25.5–6) and which gives the other close relative first rights over marriage to Ruth and to Naomi's land.

This story may have been a challenge to the people of Israel. They were God's chosen people, but Ruth, a foreigner, is a clear example of love and obedience to the God she has taken for her own. The one who reflects God's love most is an outsider. This is emphasized even more strongly when we discover that Ruth was an ancestor of David, the most prominent of Israel's kings. For Christians too there is a significance in that Ruth is named as an ancestor of Jesus.

### **TO THINK ABOUT AND DISCUSS**

1. Ruth's promise to Naomi involved putting Naomi's interests before her own. Keeping promises may sometimes be difficult and mean that we have to consider someone else's needs above our own.

Have you ever made a promise which has meant giving something up in order to keep the promise?

In what situations would you be prepared to put someone else's interests first, no matter what the cost may be to you?

What do you think is the most significant promise anyone can make?

2. Poor people were allowed to pick up the grain left behind by the workers at the harvest. This was one way in which the community provided for those in need. Boaz goes one step further and invites Ruth to eat with him and his workers, meaning that she is no longer an outsider.

In which ways are we able to show concern for those who are poor today?

Do you think that today's society makes enough provision for those in need?

Are there ways in which we, as individuals, can be more welcoming to outsiders or those who are new to our area? In what practical ways can we help people to feel part of a community?

3. Ruth had to make some difficult choices. She could have chosen to return to her own family and friends but instead she risked all to be with Naomi.

How do you think Ruth made this decision?

Think about the times when you have to make important decisions and choices. How do you do it? Who do you look to for guidance?

## SOMETHING TO DO

1. Think about the important choices you have made in your life. You may like to write them down or to draw a symbol to represent them. For example, moving house could be represented by an outline of a house. As you do this, ask yourself the following questions:

Who else was affected by the decision? – write their names underneath.

Looking back, what were the good or bad things about the choice you made? Write them under the headings "good" and "bad".

You may like to map out the major changes in your life in this way and to share it with someone close to you.

e.g.



Husband/wife, children, parents

### Good things

met new friends  
better school for children  
more room  
nicer garden

### Bad things

further from parents  
difficult to get to know people at first  
longer journey to work  
difficult to keep up with old friends

Is there a way in which we can learn from the experience of choices we have made in the past, and their consequences?

## DAVID AND SAUL

### INTRODUCTION

Some people seem to be destined for a life of glittering success. They seem to have all the advantages and an ability to always land on their feet. Other people make unlikely heroes – achieving success against all the odds.

David falls into the latter category. An ordinary, humble shepherd-boy with no claims to fame and fortune, David was chosen as Israel's future king while Saul was still on the throne. He did not become king immediately and was taken on initially as a musician to soothe the troubled King Saul.

David did not become king by his own efforts, although the road was never easy and he faced danger and dilemmas on the way. David, the most famous of Israel's kings, was a surprising choice, but is yet another example of the way in which the Bible's story develops through the most unlikely of people.

#### *BIBLICAL PASSAGES*

*David as a boy:* 1 Samuel 16.1–13, 17.34–37

*In Saul's court:* 1 Samuel 16.14–23

*David and Goliath:* 1 Samuel 17.1–58

*Saul's jealousy:* 1 Samuel 18.1–19.24

*David and Jonathan:* 1 Samuel 18.1–4, 20.1–42

*David is persecuted by Saul:* 1 Samuel 19.11–17

*David flees from Saul:* 1 Samuel 21.1–23

*David spares Saul's life:* 1 Samuel 24.1–22, 26.1–25

### BACKGROUND

David was chosen by God to do a job, and anointed by the prophet Samuel as king. In the time before he becomes king he is given time and opportunity to develop the characteristics that will make him a successful king of Israel. More importantly, David has to rely upon God and it is this above all else that will lead to his success as king.

Israelite kings were chosen by God and were responsible for ensuring that both they and the nation kept God's laws. As in the other historical writings of the Old Testament it is very clear that faithfulness to God brings success while disobedience brings disaster to the individual king and to the nation as a whole.

Saul was Israel's first king and was given the responsibility of bringing unity and peace to a newly united nation. However, Saul loses sight of God, which leads to his eventual downfall. Towards the end this is illustrated even more clearly as Saul has completely lost his way, preferring to consult a medium, and through her the dead prophet Samuel, than to ask God for guidance.

David defeats Goliath with the most unlikely of weapons – a sling which was used by shepherds to ward off wild animals. Goliath, a Philistine, was a formidable match for a shepherd boy, but whereas Goliath mocked God, David called on God's help and thus defeated his huge and better armed opponent.

## **TO THINK ABOUT AND DISCUSS**

1. We learn that David was chosen to do a job and went through a period of preparation to equip him for this. Have you ever been chosen to do something for which you had to prepare?

What were your feelings at being chosen?

What did you do to prepare yourself for what you had to do?

2. The loyalties of all the characters in the story are tested at some time. Jonathan has to choose between his father and his friend; Michal has to choose between her husband and her father and Saul between his own preservation and following God. David has to face perhaps the most difficult test -choosing between his king and his God. This is a problem many people have to face. People who are married may face conflicting loyalties between their spouse and their parents, or children may feel a conflict between being loyal to brother and sister or parents.

Have you ever faced a conflict in loyalties?

How have you resolved it?

Where do you feel your loyalties lie?

3. Saul cannot seem to get his priorities right. He is confused by all around him and feels persecuted and abandoned by his family, seeing conspiracy everywhere. In his confusion and torment he loses sight of God. Eventually the Philistines attack and Saul, with three of his sons, ends up on the battlefield. His sons are killed and Saul is injured. He can see no positive resolution and kills himself by falling on his sword.

In the Bible suicide is rare and is always linked with disgrace.

Was it brave or cowardly of Saul to commit suicide?

What were his other options?

Is suicide always wrong?

## **SOMETHING TO DO**

1. David was a musician, a poet, a brave fighter and a loyal friend. Think about the qualities you would expect to find in a leader. Draw up your picture of the ideal leader.
2. David used music to soothe Saul. Music is often used to help people relax. Listen to some of your favourite music and think about how it makes you feel. You may like to compare your choices with other members of the group.

# ELIJAH

## INTRODUCTION

The use and abuse of power has always been a central issue in human society. In modern times we have seen dictators using their power to suppress the voices of ordinary people. Hitler was swept to power by the popular vote and was seen as the answer to all Germany's problems. However, with his abuse of power and merciless slaughter of Jews, gypsies and other ethnic groups, he turned out to be the biggest tyrant the world had ever known. When we elect our governments we entrust them with the power to control many aspects of our lives – and we trust that they will use their powers wisely.

The story of Elijah is also the story of a king who misuses the power invested in him by God. His queen, Jezebel, colludes with him and together they try to suppress the voices of all who oppose them.

Elijah represents the legitimate use of power. The source of his power is authentic and he uses that power to expose the corruption of the rulers of Israel.

### *BIBLICAL PASSAGES*

*Elijah and the drought:* 1 Kings 16.29—17.24

*Elijah and the prophets of Baal:* 1 Kings 18.16–46

*Elijah on Mount Sinai:* 1 Kings 19.1–18

*Elijah is taken up to heaven:* 2 Kings 2.1–18

## BACKGROUND

The first and second books of Kings, in which the story of Elijah appears, continue the history of the Israelite monarchs which began in the books of Samuel. The monarchy was instituted by God at the time of Saul, and in the books of Kings each ruler is judged according to his loyalty to God. The loyalty of the king is not simply a personal matter, but has an effect on the success of the whole nation. The role of the prophets was to warn the people not to worship idols or to disobey God.

Ahab and Jezebel try to use their power for the wrong purposes and will not listen to anyone who opposes them. They permanently silence the prophets of Israel and only Elijah escapes. The people are forced to worship Baal and to abandon their worship of God. Ahab is presented as the most notorious of Israel's kings up to that point. His reign lasted for 22 years.

Jezebel was the daughter of the king of Phoenicia. She sought to impose her faith on Israel and brought hundreds of her prophets with her on her marriage to Ahab. She encouraged Ahab in his wrongdoing and in his worship of Baal.

In Israel the kings acted only under the power of God, their power was not personal. Ahab goes wrong when he follows his own will rather than the will of God.

Elijah, by contrast, acts as channel for God's power and God protects him. The widow with whom he takes (17.8–24) is without personal power, but through Elijah, God's power is used to for both the widow and Elijah. The faith of Elijah and the widow is tested when her son dies, as they ascribe the power to give or take life to God – in contrast with Ahab and Jezebel, who take life as they see fit. The powerlessness of Baal and his prophets is clearly demonstrated by Elijah when he challenges them to prove that what they say is true.

God's demonstration of power does not have to be loud or aggressive. Elijah learns something new about the power and character of God when God speaks to him in a soft whisper of a voice. He shows Elijah that he is not alone – there are 7000 people left alive in Israel who are loyal to God.

The final demonstration that true power comes from God and is not attached to individual human beings is when the prophetic power, or mantle, is passed from Elijah to his successor, Elisha.

### *Words which may need explaining*

Baal – the male Canaanite fertility god. "Baal" means "master".

Prophet – a person who proclaims a message from God.

## **TO THINK ABOUT AND DISCUSS**

1. The story of Elijah and other stories in the books of Kings deal with the issue of making the right decision and doing what is right. The kings are judged on whether they did what was right and followed God, and the people also had to choose between the prophets of Baal and what Elijah said.

Do you ever find it difficult to make up your mind, or are you someone who finds decision-making relatively easy?

Do you think the people had a real choice in deciding who to follow, or are there times when fear of the consequences can mean that there is no real choice?

2. Political parties and their leaders are often described as being "in power" or "in opposition".

Where does the power of politicians come from? Is it their own personal power, or is it simply given to them as a means of doing their job?

When is it right to oppose those in power? Have you ever opposed something which has been decided by those in power?

3. Elijah experiences a different side of God's character when God speaks to him in a still, small voice. He had previously experienced the full might of God's power in the control of the elements.

Do you think this helped Elijah to develop a new understanding of God?

Why do you think the Bible shows God acting in different ways?

What picture do you have of God? What characteristics does he have?

## **SOMETHING TO DO**

1. Think about the areas of your life in which you exercise some control or power.

Where does your power come from? Do you always use it wisely or do you sometimes use it to manipulate?

You may like to develop a chart on which you can write or develop symbols for right and wrong uses of power.

2. Think about someone you know and list their characteristics. Do they always appear in the same way to other people? Draw up a profile of yourself or someone you know, as you, or they, might appear in a particular situation or with particular people.

# DANIEL

## INTRODUCTION

Throughout history there have been people who have lived in a place where they feel they don't really belong. Wars and occupations of territories have displaced people since the beginning of time and groups of people have adjusted in different ways to the challenges posed by living in a hostile environment.

In our own time we have witnessed the plight of those who, by force of circumstance, have had to leave all that is familiar and try to make new lives in an alien country. Others have chosen to experience the tensions of living in a culture different from their own, and the pressures to conform to standards with which they would not necessarily identify.

The story of Daniel is about a group of young men who have been forced to leave their own country and to live in Babylon. The faith and principles of Daniel and his three friends are tested to the limits as they struggle to balance the requirements of their new ruler with the demands which God makes of them.

### *BIBLICAL PASSAGES*

*Daniel and his friends:* Daniel 1.1–21

*Nebuchadnezzar's dream:* Daniel 2.1–49, 4.1–37

*Belshazzar's feast:* Daniel 5.1–31

*Daniel in the lions' den:* Daniel 6.1–28

## BACKGROUND

The setting of the book of Daniel is clearly identified. Judah, the southern kingdom, was defeated by Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon in 597 BCE. The royal family and people of influence were taken back to Babylon. Ten years later, in 587 BCE, the remaining inhabitants of Judah rebelled and Nebuchadnezzar responded by destroying Jerusalem and the Temple. At this time many people died or were taken into exile in Babylon. In 539 BCE Babylon was defeated by Persia and many Jewish exiles were allowed to go home. Some, however, like Daniel, chose to stay on in Babylon.

Daniel and his friends Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah are given new Babylonian names, Belteshazzar, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. They are expected to lose some of their own identity in order to conform to the expectations of their new rulers.

The biblical account says that God gave the four young men the qualities and skills which enabled them to gain favour with the king. Daniel's skill in interpreting visions and dreams is also ascribed to God. The story emphasizes God's sovereignty – God can use situations and people to fulfil his own purpose, although it is up to individuals to make choices between right and wrong.

Daniel and his friends would not eat the king's food because it wasn't Kosher (didn't conform to Jewish food laws) and had probably been offered to idols. In spite of eating only what was regarded as inferior food, the four young men, who were obedient to God's laws looked stronger and healthier than all the other young men in the royal court. The refusal to eat unclean food was more than the adherence to a point of principle; it was part of Daniel's understanding of his own identity as part of the nation of Israel. The Jews believed that God had given them their own land. To be uprooted and driven out of that land was an intolerable strain on the nation – not only would it expose them to the

possibility of contamination by a foreign religion, but it would effectively strip them of their identity.

Daniel is conscious that the identity of the Jews must be maintained at all costs and will do all he can to ensure that it is not compromised.

The writing on the wall at Belshazzar's feast announces God's judgement on Babylonia and on Belshazzar. Daniel's prophetic words are found to be true within hours as a new king takes the throne. Again, this demonstrates God's control over the events of history, as a ruler who does not act justly is replaced and his empire overthrown.

Daniel continues to pray regularly to God even after the decree has been issued that no-one is to pray to a god. Daniel does not act in deliberate defiance, but simply continues to pray, as he always has, three times a day. If he were to stop praying he would be defying God, so he makes his choice, knowing full well the danger it puts him in, as a Persian law, once made, could not be revoked.

Lions were kept for hunting, not just for execution purposes. Daniel's faithfulness to God is rewarded as the lions do not come near him. This is probably the best-known part of the story, but the whole story illustrates Daniel's obedience and God's faithfulness, not just this part.

## **TO THINK ABOUT AND DISCUSS**

1. Daniel and his friends would not compromise their own beliefs even though this brought them into conflict with authority.

Think about the things you feel strongly about. What are the issues you really care about? On which points would you not be prepared to compromise your beliefs?

2. Daniel was a stranger in a foreign country, taken there by force. Despite the king's attempts to integrate him, for example by giving him a new name, he never quite fitted in.

Have you ever felt you were the odd one out? Think about how this made you feel.

Do you ever come into contact with others whose beliefs and behaviour are different from your own? How do you deal with situations like this?

Are there ways of integrating people into different groups whilst allowing them to retain their own identity?

3. Daniel clearly believed that God was using him for a purpose. He could see God's action in the wider arena of history and believed that God could act through all situations and events.

Can you see patterns in your life where things seem to have come together for a purpose?

You may have made significant choices in your life – think about those choices and their consequences. Were they the right ones? Have these choices influenced the way things have gone since?

## **SOMETHING TO DO**

1. Look through newspaper and magazines, or think back to TV or radio news stories covering one or two weeks to see if you can find stories about people who are different in some way from the society around them. You may find stories about groups of people forced to move away from their homes, or individuals who do not conform.

As you think about the stories, see if any refer to someone who, like David, is put in a difficult position because they are standing up for their beliefs.

Are there people who are different because of their race or colour? Are there similarities with the story of Daniel?

Think about the way in which we treat people who are different. You may want to consider your own attitudes and to develop more positive ways of dealing with differences.

# JONAH

## INTRODUCTION

The story of Jonah is quite different from stories of other prophets in the Bible. Jonah is portrayed as a reluctant prophet who will do almost anything to get away from what God wants him to do. "Jonah the moaner" seems a particularly appropriate nickname for him.

Jonah may not fit our understanding of a "typical" prophet, but in many ways this may make him a more believable character; someone who expresses his fears, anger and resentment in no uncertain terms.

The story of Jonah gives us an opportunity to explore facets of our own characters as well as an opportunity to understand more about the nature and character of God.

### *BIBLICAL PASSAGE*

The book of Jonah

## BACKGROUND

The book of Jonah, unlike other books of the prophets, does not tell us when or where the prophet lived and worked. There is a reference to a prophet named Jonah in 2 Kings 14.25, which suggests that he lived in the northern kingdom of Israel in the reign of King Jeroboam II (786–746 BCE). Many scholars believe that this is the Jonah about whom this book was written.

However, not all scholars see this as a historical account, but rather as a parable. In this case it may be a popular story which is given a more challenging meaning by linking it to an Israelite

Whether the story is seen as a historical account or as a parable it is still a significant story for Christians and Jews. It is read in Jewish synagogues on the Day of Atonement, and Jesus refers to it in his teaching (Matthew 12.39–41).

### *Words which may need explaining*

Prophet – a person who proclaims a message from God.

Parable – a story which has a deeper meaning and teaches spiritual truth.

Day of Atonement – a day of public fasting on which Jews seek God's forgiveness.

## TO THINK ABOUT AND DISCUSS

1. Because Jonah cannot bring himself to do what God asks him to do he tries to run away. He soon discovers that he cannot get away from God, who is in control of the whole of creation. He realises that even from within the fish, God can hear him.

Many of us as children threatened to run away from home. We may only have reached the front door or the garden gate and then decided to return to the love and security of our family.

Have you ever tried to run away from something or someone, only to find that something draws you back?

Think about the reasons you wanted to leave something behind. What or who brought you back?

Does your story have any similarities with Jonah's?

You may wish to share your experience with someone else.

2. A key theme of this story is forgiveness. God forgives the people of Nineveh for the wrong things they have done and he forgives Jonah's disobedience. Jonah finds it easier to feel anger than to forgive, but God makes him ask himself whether he has any right to be angry. Compare this with the way God reacts to Job's friends (Job 42.7–8), who had told Job he should not have complained against God. God is angry with Job's friends because they are not truthful in their dealings with him. The Bible does not prescribe a passive acceptance and doesn't discourage human beings from telling God their side of the story.

Is it always right to be angry? Can you think of cases in which anger might be justified?

Think of a recent occasion when you felt angry. Could you have done something to avoid this anger? Did you have the right to be angry?

Is it always right to forgive? Can you think of any situations when forgiveness might not be appropriate?

You may like to look at recent news stories and consider cases in which forgiveness might be difficult.

3. The sailors on the boat placed their faith in their own gods – images created by human beings. They drew lots to discover who was the cause of the storm in which they were caught up. The people of Nineveh worshipped Ishtar, an idol. The story of Jonah shows that only God himself has power over creation and that it is pointless to put faith in powerless idols.

Although we may not worship images of gods in today's society there are other ways in which we place our faith in superstition or in things which cannot really help us. Some people play the lottery and believe that certain numbers are lucky. Some of us cross our fingers for luck or wear a lucky charm.

Can you think of things which you do to bring you luck? Do you believe that certain rituals or objects have the power to help you?

Perhaps you always read your horoscope in the paper? How much do you trust it?

Do you think you would have been convinced to turn your back on these things in the way that the sailors or citizens of Nineveh were, or are they just harmless bits of fun?

4. Scholars disagree about whether the story of Jonah is a historical account or whether it is a parable. What do you think about this? Does the way in which you view the story affect the way in which you understand its meaning?

## **SOMETHING TO DO**

1. Think about the times in your life when somebody has hurt you, either deliberately or unintentionally. It may help if you focus on the different periods in your life – childhood, adolescence, young adulthood etc.

If there are people you now feel it is right to forgive, write down their names on a separate piece of paper and take a few minutes to think about them.

If you feel you are now able to forgive them and perhaps to acknowledge your own mistake, take each piece of paper and tear it into small pieces before throwing it away. You do not need to show anyone what you have written.

[It may be appropriate with some groups for the leader to say a short prayer at this point.]

If you prefer you may wish, instead of writing, to imagine, in your mind's eye, the names written on pieces of paper and thrown into the fire.

OR

2. Read (or listen to on audio) Jesus' parables about forgiveness:  
The unforgiving servant – Matthew 18.21–35  
The workers in the vineyard – Matthew 20.1–16

Think about the similarities and differences between the way forgiveness is shown in these stories and in the story of Jonah. What do we learn about God and about ourselves?