

CHAPTER 3

Israelite Monotheism and Law

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

According to the Hebrew Bible, Abraham is the father of the Jewish faith. Living in Mesopotamia, he broke with the polytheistic traditions of the inhabitants and journeyed to Canaan. There he worshipped the one true God. Every New Year Jews celebrate his dedication in the *Rosh Hashanah* liturgy (see Chapter 80). Yet, there is some uncertainty whether the patriarchal accounts in the Bible are historically accurate. Some scholars argue that they are simply myths presented as history. What do you think? Given the lack of extra-Biblical evidence, is it reasonable to assume that the writers of the Torah accurately recorded events that took place nearly 4,000 years ago? Are there compelling reasons why we should believe that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were real persons?

Turning to the legal sections of the Torah, you should again reflect on the claim that the laws contained in Scripture parallel the law codes of the ancient Near East. As we have seen, the Jewish tradition asserts that the 613 laws in the Five Books of Moses were revealed by God to Moses on Mt Sinai. But is this claim plausible? Given the similarities between law codes of the ancient Near East and the laws contained in Scripture, is it more likely that the Biblical writers borrowed from these legal resources? The same applies to sacrifice. Was the sacrificial system of the ancient Israelites similarly influenced by Babylonian customs?

THINGS TO DO

- Look at the list of commandments in Chapter 64 – these are the 613 commandments in the Torah. Consider whether these laws were formulated in response to the conditions prevailing in ancient Israel? Or, as Orthodox Jews believe, were they revealed by God to Moses? Which view seems more likely?
 - Compare the laws found in the Code of Hammurabi with laws found in the Book of Leviticus. Do these seem to be similar codes, or are there important differences? Make a list of what seem to be similarities and differences.
 - Go to Google.com and look for websites dealing with the Code of Hammurabi such as www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/medieval/hammenu.htm.
- Click on images, and look at the illustrations connected with Hammurabi. Do the same for sacrifice in Judaism and the ancient Near East.
- Stay in Google and look at websites related to animal welfare such as www.animal-rights.com and www.lib.ncsu.edu/arights.

Consider whether killing animals for sacrifice or for any other reason is justified. Have a discussion about this subject with other students or your friends.

TIPS FOR TEACHERS

- Read the story about the sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22. Divide the class into small groups and ask them whether such an act could ever be justified. Reconvene the class and have a general discussion of the conflict in this story between loyalty to God and universal moral standards. You should emphasize that the account of Abraham's sacrifice is read every year in the *Rosh Hashanah* service (see Chapter 80), and therefore this Biblical story raises serious theological questions for modern Jews.
- Invite an Orthodox rabbi to speak to your class about the historicity of the Bible. Ask him to explain why Orthodox Jews believe that the patriarchs were historical figures and why their lives are so important for modern Jews.
- Ask an expert on animal welfare to speak to your class. Have a discussion about human responsibilities to animals. This is important in the context of ancient sacrifice, but it will also have implications for Jewish dietary laws (see Chapter 87).
- Ask your students to write a short essay about the ways in which sacrifice continues to have spiritual relevance in contemporary society and to analyse why this might be so.