

FOR SCHOOLS · KS2 (YEARS 3–6) AND KS3 (YEAR 7)

One story, three traditions

One or two 50–60 minute lessons. Pupils compare how one shared story, Jonah (peace be upon him) and the great fish (with Noah (peace be upon him) as an alternative), is told in the Hebrew Bible, the Christian tradition and the Qur'an. They learn that the three faiths share many figures, that each tells the story in its own words for its own purposes, and how historians and believers study these texts differently.

Curriculum links

- Locally agreed syllabuses commonly include sacred texts, stories and their meanings, and how stories are shared across religions. Check your own syllabus's wording.
- KS2 themes: sacred texts; stories that teach about God and how to live; festivals linked to stories (Yom Kippur, Easter, Eid al-Adha).
- KS3 themes: how sacred texts are interpreted; shared figures in the Abrahamic faiths; the difference between historical and theological readings.
- Cross-curricular links: English (comparing versions of a story, narrative structure) and History (the Assyrian empire and Nineveh).

Objectives

- Retell the story of Jonah in outline and know that it appears in the Hebrew Bible and the Qur'an and is referred to by Jesus (peace be upon him) in the Gospels.

- Identify at least three similarities and two differences between the versions.
- Explain what each tradition takes from the story: repentance and mercy (Judaism, read on Yom Kippur), the sign of Jonah pointing to the resurrection (Christianity), and Jonah's prayer in the darkness (Islam).
- Know that Abraham, Noah, Moses, Joseph and Mary (peace be upon them) are also shared figures.

Starter

Ten minutes. Play a game of "telephone" with one sentence whispered round the class. Compare the start and end. Then ask: if three families have told the same story for thousands of years, would it be identical? Introduce the key idea: the three faiths share stories, but each tells them in its own way and for its own reasons. Believers hold their own scripture as revelation; historians compare versions. Avoid saying one "copied" another.

Main activities

- Hear the story (15 minutes). Read or tell the story of Jonah from the book of Jonah: the call to Nineveh, the running away, the storm, the great fish, the prayer, Nineveh's repentance and God's question about mercy (Jonah 4:11). Use the site's Jonah page for short extracts. Show images of the sea, a ship, a great fish and the ruins of Nineveh, never of Jonah.
- Three panels (20 minutes). In groups, pupils receive three short panels: the Hebrew Bible (Jonah 2 and 4:11, JPS 1917), the Christian tradition (Matthew 12:40–41, World English Bible: "as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the whale…") and the Qur'an (21:87–88 and 37:139–148: "There is no god but You. Glory be to You. I

have been among the wrongdoers”). On a large Venn diagram, they sort details into Same and Different.
- What does each faith learn? (10 minutes). Each group takes one tradition and writes a sentence beginning “For [Jews / Christians / Muslims], the story of Jonah teaches…”. Share and compare. Mention when it is read or remembered: Jews read Jonah on Yom Kippur; Christians connect it with Easter; Muslims say Jonah’s prayer in times of distress.

Plenary

Five to ten minutes. Pupils answer one of two questions in writing: “Why do you think the book of Jonah ends with a question?” or “Is anywhere too dark to pray?”. Then preview other shared stories (Noah, Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Mary) for a follow-up lesson where groups choose one and repeat the three-panel method.

Differentiation

Support: tell the story with a sequence of six picture cards (setting, ship, storm, fish, city, plant) and use simplified panels with one quotation each. Use sentence frames for the Venn diagram. Stretch: KS3 pupils research Nineveh (excavated in the 1840s, reliefs in the British Museum, the Nabi Yunus shrine destroyed in 2014) and discuss what archaeology can and cannot tell us about scripture. Or compare Noah in Genesis 6–9 and Qur’an 11:25–49 using the same method.

Assessment

Look for pupils who can (a) retell the outline accurately; (b) identify similarities and differences between versions using evidence from the

texts; (c) explain what each faith learns from the story in that faith's terms; (d) avoid the words "copied" or "the real version", and avoid drawing Jonah.

Three faiths: fact box

JUDAISM

The book of Jonah is one of the twelve minor prophets in the Hebrew Bible. It is read in full on the afternoon of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, as a lesson that sincere repentance is always welcomed.

CHRISTIANITY

Jesus spoke of "the sign of Jonah" (Matthew 12:39–41), and Christians read Jonah's three days in the fish as a sign of the resurrection. Jonah was a popular image in early Christian art.

ISLAM

Jonah (Yunus) has a surah named after him (10). His prayer in the darkness (Qur'an 21:87) is one of the best-loved Muslim prayers, and his people are praised for turning back to God (10:98).

TAKE CARE

Never show or ask pupils to draw any prophet, in any of the three faiths, in this lesson: draw the sea, the ship, the fish, the city, the plant. Say "great fish" as the text does; many people say "whale".

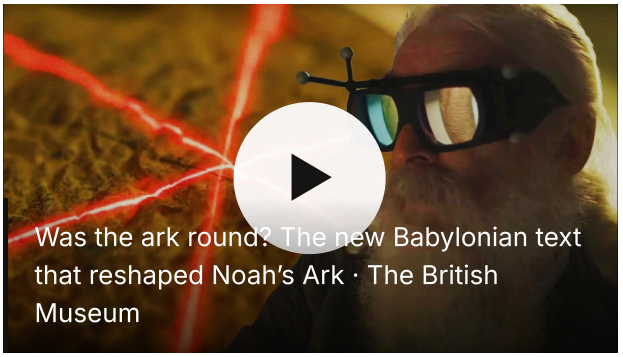
Avoid “copied” and “the real version”; say “each tradition tells it in its own words”.

Watch



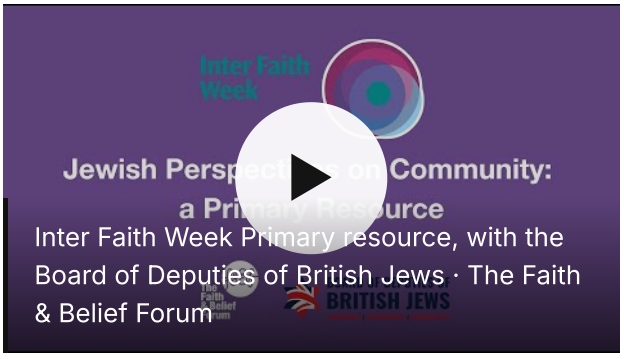
Watch on YouTube ↗

A Jewish teacher explains the story of Jonah (KS3, or teacher preparation).



Watch on YouTube ↗

For the Noah alternative: the British Museum on the Ark Tablet.



Watch on YouTube ↗

An Inter Faith Week resource for primary classes, for a wider unit on shared stories.

Resources

- Ofsted research review: religious education (2021)

- NATRE: National Association of Teachers of RE
- Jonah and the great fish (page on this site)
- The book of Jonah (Sefaria)
- Qur'an 37:139–148 (Quran.com)
- Matthew 12 (Bible Gateway, WEB)
- The Nineveh lion-hunt reliefs, British Museum (Wikipedia)