

Jimmy Goes to Sunday School

By Ward Ricker

Episode 4 – Abraham

“Last week,” Mrs. Peabody started, “we started talking about Abraham, a great man of god from whom came a great nation, the nation of Israel.”

Jimmy sat, as usual, in the front row, next to his buddy, Aaron, listening attentively as Mrs. Peabody began the Sunday School class. One of the girls was missing this time, but Jimmy wasn't concerned. He was there to learn about god.

“God promised to Abraham,” Mrs. Peabody continued, “that he was going to make a great nation from his descendants. Abraham and his wife, though, were already very old, and Abraham said to god, ‘I am already a hundred years old, and my wife is already ninety, and we haven't had any kids. We are too old to have children at our age.’ But god told him that, even though they were very old, they would still have children.”

Jimmy, though, ever curious, raised his hand and asked the teacher, “So Abraham talked to god himself?”

“Yes, Jimmy,” Mrs. Peabody answered, “Abraham spoke to god and god spoke to him.”

“Oh, neat!” Jimmy responded. “Let's talk with god today. I want to hear his big, booming voice. This will be fun!”

“No, Jimmy,” Mrs. Peabody answered, “It's not like that today. This was back in Bible times, and Abraham was one of god's special people.”

Jimmy was disappointed. “But we're special, too, aren't we? Why won't god speak to us?”

“Because that's just not the way it works today, Jimmy. I'm sorry, but you'll just have to accept that.”

Jimmy pouted a little bit but kept listening as Mrs. Peabody continued.

“So god told Abraham that, even though they were very old, they would have a son, and that the descendants of that son would be a great nation of people. However...” Now Mrs. Peabody's voice got that ominous tone again. “... Sarah didn't get pregnant for a while after that, and she didn't believe that god was going to keep his promise, so she gave her servant, whose name was Hagar, to Abraham, so he could have children with her.

“She *gave* her to him?” Jimmy asked with surprise.

Nervously, Mrs. Peabody responded, “Yes, Jimmy. That's the way they did things in those days. One person could give one of her servants to someone else, so the servant could help out that other person.”

“She gave her to him? So he owned her?”

“Well, that's probably not the best way to put it, Jimmy...”

Jimmy didn't mean to interrupt her, but he was just thinking.

“But you said she gave her to him, so he must have owned her. Was she a slave?”

“Well, Jimmy, look, that's not the right way to think of it. They did things a little differently in those days...”

Again, Jimmy didn't mean to interrupt her, but he was really trying to figure out what was going on.

“So Abraham screwed a woman who was given to him?”

“Jimmy!” Mrs. Peabody yelled. “That is no way to talk in god's house! We don't talk about people scr... ah, doing things like that.”

“I'm sorry, Mrs. Peabody,” Jimmy responded, noticing the pink in her face. “What I mean is he did whatever he did with a woman who was given to him so that they could have a baby?”

“Yes, Jimmy,” Mrs. Peabody responded, “but this was not god’s plan. This was because Abraham and Sarah weren’t trusting in god the way they should have been.”

“Oh, I see. They were sinning, I guess, then, right?”

“Yes, Jimmy. I would say they were sinning. Even god’s best people sometimes do something that is sinful....”

Jimmy didn’t mean to interrupt the teacher, but he was just thinking. “So Ms. Hagar couldn’t say ‘no’ to Abraham when he wanted to do that thing with her?”

“Jimmy, you’re thinking this through way too much,” Mrs. Peabody protested.

Jimmy thought he could see sweat forming on her forehead. “Well, if Abraham was doing that thing with her, and she didn’t have any choice, then that just seems rather strange. When I get home I will have to ask my mom and dad if there is a word for someone who does that thing with someone who isn’t given any choice.”

Mrs. Peabody glared at Jimmy, and Jimmy realized that she was really mad at him.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t mean to interrupt you. I was just trying to figure out what was going on. Go ahead. What happened after that?”

Mrs. Peabody pulled herself together and continued. “Well, children, Hagar had a son, and she named her son ‘Ishmael’. God then told Abraham that his descendants would be very special, so Abraham was to do something to all of them that no other people did to their children and that would set them apart as special. Well, at least he told him to do it to all the boys. He couldn’t do it to the girls.”

At this point, even though Mrs. Peabody kept smiling as she spoke, Jimmy sensed that she was just a tad nervous. This made him all the more interested in what she had to say next.

“This was a very special thing called ‘circumcision’,” Mrs. Peabody continued. “It was tiny operation that he was to perform on all the boys, removing a tiny bit of skin that they didn’t really need. This would distinguish Abraham’s descendants from the other people in the world.”

“Why didn’t he do it to the girls?” Jimmy logically asked. He could see that this made Mrs. Peabody just a tiny bit more nervous, but she continued explaining.

“Well, girls don’t have this particular piece of skin, Jimmy,” she responded, “so Abraham couldn’t do it to the girls.”

“What piece of skin was that?” Jimmy, again logically, asked.

“Well, Jimmy,” Mrs. Peabody responded, still a little more uncomfortable looking, “it’s just a little flap of skin that covers the end of a boy’s ... well, you know ... his penis. Since girls don’t have one of those, Abraham couldn’t circumcise the girls.”

“Well, it must have hurt. Why would god make him cut on a baby’s body?”

“Well, like I said, it was not a necessary piece of skin. It probably hurt a little bit, but the baby boy was just as well off without it, and god knew that.”

“Well, why did god make the piece of skin to begin with if the baby was just as well off without it?” Jimmy asked, again quite logically.

“Jimmy, must you ask so many questions? We aren’t told why god made the flap of skin in the first place. Maybe because he was planning all along to create his special people, and he put it there so that Abraham could do this. But we aren’t really told why, so let’s try not to ask as many questions and just listen to the story that god has for us.”

Addressing the rest of the class, Mrs. Peabody continued. “So Abraham took Ishmael and all the other boys that lived in his household and circumcised them. After that, god told Abraham again that his descendants would form a special nation, and, not only that, but that they would be as numerous as the stars in the sky or the sand on the seashore. Does anyone know how many stars there are in the sky or how many pieces of sand there are on the seashore?”

The children just looked at her like she was nuts, so she answered for them. "No, of course you don't. No one could ever count all the pieces of sand on the seashore. There are just too many of them. And that is how god said that the descendants of Abraham would be.

"So when god said this, Abraham said that he only had the one son, Ishmael, but god told him that it would not be Ishmael's children that would number so many, but it would be the descendants of Sarah's child. 'But Sarah doesn't have any children,' Abraham contested, 'and she is too old to have any now.' But god reminded him of his promise he had given before and told him that Sarah, even though she was old, would have a son, and told him that he should name the son Isaac.

"Well, after that, Abraham went to a place called Gerar, which had a king named Abimelech," Mrs. Peabody started to continue, but the girl in the back row giggled, and Mrs. Peabody looked at her.

"Abimelech?" she asked with a giggle.

"Yes, Judy, that was his name," Mrs. Peabody explained. "Like I said last week, they had names back then that sound funny to us, but it was probably not an unusual name at that time."

"Well, anyway," Mrs. Peabody continued, "King Abimelech was not a god-fearing man, and when he saw Abraham's wife Sarah he had her brought right into his house."

"Why?" Jimmy asked.

"Well, because she was a woman and he was a man and he probably thought she was quite attractive."

"A ninety-year-old woman?"

"Yes, Jimmy, some women can be quite beautiful, even though they are old."

"But she must have been all wrinkled," Jimmy said, trying not to laugh.

"Now Jimmy, let's not be making fun. She was probably not wrinkled. Like I said, some women can still be quite attractive when they get older." Mrs. Peabody gave him a stern look.

"So, anyway," Mrs. Peabody addressed the class again, "King Abimelech brought Sarah to his house, but, because she was Abraham's wife, god was displeased with King Abimelech, so god stopped all of the people in Abimelech's household from having any children. God then spoke to King Abimelech in a dream and said that, because he had taken another man's wife, god was going to put him to death.

"King Abimelech, though, told god that he didn't know that Sarah was Abraham's wife, so god told him to send her back to Abraham and god would spare his life. So the next morning Abimelech sent Sarah back to Abraham, and god forgave him and let Abimelech's people start having babies again."

This struck Jimmy as very strange, and he wondered why it seemed like Abraham had done nothing while his wife was taken away, so he asked, "So how come the king didn't know that Sarah was Abraham's wife. Didn't she tell him? Didn't Abraham tell the king that Sarah was his wife? What did Abraham say to the king when he took Sarah?"

"Well, kings are very powerful, so, instead of trusting in god, Abraham told the king that Sarah was his sister."

"You mean he was afraid of the king? Is this the same Abraham who fought against all those bad kings in last week's lesson and brought his nephew back?"

"Well, yes, Jimmy. Even great men of god can sometimes be afraid if they forget to trust in god. They become afraid and sometimes do what is wrong. That is why it is important to always trust in god."

"So he lied to the king about Sarah being his sister?"

"Well, it wasn't exactly a lie," Mrs. Peabody responded.

"But she was his wife, not his sister. So he was lying if he told the king she was his sister, wasn't he?"

Jimmy could see that uncomfortable look on her face as Mrs. Peabody hesitatingly responded. "Well, not really. You see, Sarah was not only his wife, she was also his half-sister."

"His half-sister!" Jimmy exclaimed. "You mean Abraham was scr... ahh ... married to his own sister?"

"Well, Jimmy," Mrs. Peabody replied, "yes, but..."

Jimmy didn't mean to interrupt her, but he was really curious about this. "So it's okay with god to have s... ah ... do what married people do, with your own sister."

"No, Jimmy, of course not. God doesn't approve of that, any more than he approves of lying. But Abraham married Sarah before he was called of god. Sometimes people do sinful things before they come to god."

"And he kept on ... ah, doing that thing with her even after god called him?"

"Jimmy, look," Mrs. Peabody responded rather angrily, "God does things that we don't always understand. We just have to accept that he knows best and do what he tells us is right."

"Well, when I grow up, I hope I have a pretty sister, so I can be like Abraham," Jimmy said.

"Jimmy, that is the devil speaking," Mrs. Peabody scolded him, getting red in the face, "and I am not going to let the devil upset this classroom when we are learning about god and his people. So you need to stop making wisecracks and listen to what you are being taught!"

Jimmy didn't understand why Mrs. Peabody was accusing him of making wisecracks. He just wanted to be like the Bible heroes he was learning about, but he quieted down and listened.

"So anyway, class, when King Abimelech saw that god was with Abraham, he gave Abraham many cattle, sheep and servants."

Jimmy wondered if these were more of those servants who had no choice but to be servants, but he didn't ask. He was going to ask if god would make people give him lots of things if he lied about his sister, but he thought that would just antagonize Mrs. Peabody, so he listened quietly.

Mrs. Peabody continued on, "After this, Abraham went back to Canaan. Now, you all remember how god had promised Abraham that his wife Sarah would have a son, don't you?" Mrs. Peabody asked the class.

No one spoke, but the children nodded their heads.

"Well, sure enough, children, god kept his promise! It wasn't long after that that Sarah, even though she was ninety years old, got pregnant and had a little baby boy. Abraham and Sarah were so happy, and Abraham named him Isaac, like god had instructed him. They circumcised him like god had instructed and everything went okay for a while. However, there was one person who wasn't very happy about it, and that was Hagar, Ishmael's mother. She was jealous of poor Isaac, because Isaac was very special to Abraham and Sarah, being the child of god's promise, and she didn't like that they were paying special attention to Isaac, as if he was so much better than Ishmael.

"When Sarah saw that Hagar was jealous, she was upset and complained to Abraham, and Abraham wanted to keep peace in his household, so he sent Hagar and Ishmael away to a place called Beersheba."

Judy giggled again when hearing this name, but Mrs. Peabody ignored her. Jimmy, though, ever curious, asked, "So is that where Hagar was from?"

"No, Jimmy," Mrs. Peabody answered. "Beersheba was a wilderness".

"A wilderness?"

"Yes, that's a place where nobody lives."

"Nobody lives there? So how were they supposed to survive."

"Well, Jimmy. God was going to take care of them in Beersheba, so you don't need to worry about that."

"So Abraham gets his slave girl pregnant, and then when his wife has a baby, he sends the slave girl and his own son away to fend in the wilderness. Wow! That Abraham was one bad dude!"

"Jimmy," Mrs. Peabody scolded, red in the face, "that's the devil talking again. I won't have that in this classroom!"

"I'm sorry," Jimmy answered again, but he was beginning to like these stories, and he was starting to find it amusing to watch Mrs. Peabody get bent out of shape when he asked questions.

Mrs. Peabody looked at Judy in the back row, who was starting to laugh. "And you, young lady, are not to be laughing at the devil's disruptions. That is the work of the devil, also!"

The girl stopped laughing, and Mrs. Peabody continued with the lesson. "After Isaac grew up to be a strong young boy, god decided he was going to test Abraham's faith. So he said to Abraham one day, 'Abraham, I want you to take your son Isaac and go to Mount Moriah...' (That was a mountain in the same land where Abraham lived.) '...and I want you to offer him to me as a burnt offering.' A burnt offering was when a person would take an animal, such as a lamb or a goat, and would kill it, put it on a stone structure called an 'altar', and burn it up as an offering to god."

Jimmy was quite surprised by this story. People would kill innocent animals just to appease this god that he was learning about? That sounded really cruel, but now god was telling Abraham to kill his own son as an offering! What kind of a god was this that he was learning about? he wondered, but before he could ask a question, Mrs. Peabody continued. "So Abraham gathered some wood for the fire, loaded it onto his donkey and took a knife, and, along with his son Isaac, they headed off toward Mount Moriah."

"Wow!" Jimmy thought. "He is really going to do it. He is going to kill his own son, because this god asked him to do so!" Jimmy decided then and there that he would not try to invite his dad to come to Sunday School and learn about this god!

"As they neared the mountain," Mrs. Peabody continued, "Isaac asked his father, 'Dad, we have wood for the fire and a knife to cut up the sacrifice, but we didn't bring any animal for the offering?'"

"'God will provide,' Abraham told Isaac and continued on up into the mountain."

"Wow! Now Abraham is lying to his son, too," Jimmy thought. "What will he do next?" But he didn't interrupt the teacher's story.

"When they got up into the mountain, Abraham gathered some stones and built an altar. He then placed the wood on the altar. He then tied up Isaac and laid him on top of the altar."

Jimmy listened, wide-eyed.

"Abraham then took his knife and lifted it up into the air over Isaac..."

"Oh my god!" Jimmy thought and almost screamed out. "He's really going to do it!" Jimmy looked around nervously, for fear that someone might be coming in to tie him up, but no one entered.

"Then, just as he was going to bring the knife down onto Isaac," Mrs. Peabody continued, "an angel called down to him from heaven and said, 'Abraham, do not hurt the child. Now I know that you really fear god, since you were willing to sacrifice your own child to me.'"

Ignoring whether Abraham was sacrificing Isaac to the angel or to god, Jimmy just wondered how anyone could be willing to kill his own son. He was pretty sure that his own dad would never do such a thing, but he was getting rather worried. Before he could express his horror, though, Mrs. Peabody finished the story. "So Abraham looked around after the angel spoke, and he saw a ram, that is, a male sheep, caught in some nearby thickets, so he untied his son and took the ram and offered it instead of his son."

Looking around again to make sure no one was coming in to tie him up, Jimmy let his nerves calm enough for him to think. The idea of a father trying to kill his own son or a god asking someone to do so was just too horrible to even ask about, so, after a moment he thought and just asked, trying to remain calm, "So god didn't know whether Abraham feared him before he asked him to do this? He had to test him to find out?"

"Well, god knows everything, Jimmy" Mrs. Peabody responded and seemed to be trying to think of a further explanation.

"But he said that he only then knew that Abraham feared him. He must not have known before."

“God just wanted Abraham to show that he feared him. God already knew it.”

“So he asked him to kill his own son, and, because he was willing to do it, he was happy with him?” Jimmy looked around the room again and added, “You don’t have anyone coming in to tie us up, do you?”

“No, of course not, Jimmy. Relax. We would never do that.”

“But that’s what your god asks people to do. If he asked you to do that, you would do it, right?” He looked to make sure there was a clear path between him and the door.

“Well, no, Jimmy ... I mean ... god would never ask us to do that.”

“But he did, didn’t he? That’s what you just said, right?”

“That was just that one time with Abraham, Jimmy. He was just testing Abraham. He doesn’t ask us to do things like that today.”

“But how do you know? If he asked Abraham to do it, he might ask you. Wouldn’t you do it if he asked you?” Jimmy continued looking around the room nervously, as he kept himself poised on the edge of his chair, ready to run.

“But he won’t, Jimmy, so you don’t need to worry.”

“So you’re saying that if he did, you would do it, then?” Jimmy asked.

“No, Jimmy. Please relax. We would never do something like that to any of you.”

“So you would disobey god’s order, then?”

“Well, no, Jimmy. I wouldn’t disobey god’s order, but he isn’t going to ask, so you don’t have to worry.”

“So god asks people to kill children, and you wouldn’t disobey his orders,” Jimmy said wide-eyed. “I’m fuckin’ outa here.” And Jimmy jumped up and ran out of the room and out of the church building before Mrs. Peabody could scold him for his language. He didn’t stop running until he got all the way home.

And Mrs. Peabody didn’t get to tell Jimmy about Abraham and his concubines.