

PEOPLE OF GOD HAVE LEADERS
Early Leaders in the Rise of the Nation
Isaac and Jacob

September 16, 2020

Ancestral History

Stories of this period were related to some degree to what was happening in Fertile Crescent. Historians can establish some correlation between ancestral history and that of ancient Near East. Primeval history (Chapters 1-12) showed us the human situation in universal terms – Human beings were to live in harmony with God and each other (Hebrew word for *peace*). Facts showed that instead people were broken, divided, and scattered. Behaviors of the people left the created world in confusion and strife. Primeval history provides the prologue to what is central to the epic narrative – A particular identity and special calling went to Israel. Calling was within the context of God's purpose to once more redeem the world. Interpretation was that God would bless the nations through the role and witness of Israel.

Family history of the ancestors of Israel concentrates on Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph. Isaac has a minor role but the narrative is governed by the sequence of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob. Key to the interpretation of this history is the three-fold promise: Possession of a land, to become a great nation, and to be a blessing to the people of the earth. Original use of the word for *blessing* was supposed to go into effect immediately. Helps us understand the importance attached to deathbed blessings (as in Isaac and Jacob). In the revision of the ancestral history the blessing was postponed to the future. It went beyond the lifetime of the original recipients and therefore became a future promise. Postponement of the promise meant this whole time period also became an interim period. Result of the postponement was the tension and anxieties of faith we see throughout Bible.

In working out the promise, stories were woven together that once had different meanings. So we are not dealing with biographies but how Israel personified its history. Personification is clear in the case of Jacob and Esau (who represents Israel and Edom). Abraham is more than an individual. He is typical of the people of God who venture into the future in faith. During the time of the tribal confederacy traditions harmonized into the story of a single family. We receive it as a father-son-grandson sequence: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Ancestors of Israel were wanderers toward a goal that God had set before them. It was a pilgrim movement from promise toward the fulfillment of that promise.

Story of Isaac (Genesis 21-35)

Isaac is the son of the promise, but his birth will also tear his family apart. Story of Hagar and Ishmael receives as much attention as that of Isaac. It is not a minor diversion in the larger story. God would make a covenant with Isaac, but God would not overlook Ishmael. Parallels with Exodus continue as Hagar and Ishmael wander in the wilderness.



Genesis 22

Last week we covered the *testing* of Abraham found in Genesis 22:1-19. We revisit the same text but center our attention on Isaac.

Jewish tradition:

In later rabbinic collections Isaac is portrayed as an adult of 37 years.

In this tradition he is fully aware of what is going to happen to him.

He not only accepts the role but begs Abraham to bind him.

He does not want to struggle in fear as that would invalidate the sacrifice.

Jerusalem Talmud states that the release of Isaac is the equivalent of the release of all Israel.

In the *Akedah* (Hebrew word for *binding*) God interceded for the sake of Isaac's descendants.

Later when they fell into sin God suppressed his wrath and had mercy on his people.

Conflict arises between the tradition that Isaac was sacrificed and that a ram was substituted. Later Jewish scholars suggested that Isaac was laid upon the altar after the wood was kindled. Although the angel prevented Abraham from slaying his son Isaac still burned to death. His ashes were then cast on Moriah (in Jewish tradition Moriah is the Temple Mount).

Christians understand Isaac as a prefigure of Christ.

Christ was the beloved Son offered as the expiatory sacrifice for the sins of the people.

Isaac (like Jesus) was miraculously conceived.

Isaac carried the wood for his own sacrifice just as Christ carried his own cross.

Journey to Moriah took three days (parallel to the three days Jesus spent in the tomb).

However, Isaac was not sacrificed (but Jesus was).

Leadership Quality for Isaac: Obedience

At no point in the story does Isaac run away.

He obeys his father and even helps carry the wood for the sacrifice.

Even at the point of being tied up we do not hear of any resistance.

Genesis 24

In this chapter we have the introduction to a second generation.

Abraham now focuses on finding a proper wife for Isaac.

Functioning without divine directives he assigns his most senior servant to the task.

He binds the servant with an oath to find a woman only among family members.
Having arrived at his destination the servant prays that he will be successful in this venture.
Writer does not imply that a lack of success would mean that God withheld his kindness.
Failure would simply be a result of the decisions made by humans.
Description of Rebekah enables us to know she will be the wife of Isaac before the servant knew.
Focus falls on how the servant faithfully handles the situation.

Rebekah agrees without hesitation to go with the servant to marry Isaac (sight unseen).
From her earlier actions we know she is decisive in character.
She is strong and determined and somewhat of an opportunist.
She takes the initiative to invite the servant of Abraham to spend the night with her family.
As with Abraham, Rebekah ventures out by faith far from her homeland and kindred.
She (like Abraham) will have a multitude of descendants.
With her strong will she will go on to shape the destiny of the next generation.
Through her advocacy for her younger son, Jacob, he in time will become Israel.

Isaac finally appears in the story and sees the caravan approaching.
Oath of the servant has been fulfilled.
Loyalty of God to Abraham and his family was known in the union between Isaac and Rebekah.



Genesis 25

Story of Abraham ends as it began (with genealogies).
As promised the life of Abraham continues through many children.
In the opening verses the writer introduces us to a side of Abraham unknown to us so far.
Keturah bore him six more children.
Names are associated with the Midianites from Syro-Arabian desert.
Writer also depicts Ishmael in terms identical to Isaac (both are sons of Abraham).

Story of Isaac / Rebekah parallels that of Abraham /Sarah.
Like Sarah, Rebekah is barren and like Abraham, Isaac is old when he becomes a father.
Unlike Abraham, Isaac prays concerning the barrenness of Rebekah.
God is moved to answer his prayers so that she conceives.

A prayer from Rebekah soon follows and God responds differently to the two prayers. In the first God enabled conception and the second involved a more complicated issue. God responded to Rebekah in an oracle (Genesis 25:23). Difficult pregnancy was to be interpreted as a sign of the future relationship between her sons. Oracle reflected the later conflict between the two nations of Israel and Edom. It helped to ground the future reality in these ancient family events.

Writer described the young men by referring to their ways of life that often stood in tension. Esau was more at home with the wild side of things and on the move with the animals. Jacob had a more settled, pastoral life-style. Jacob was quiet or mild-mannered at least at this point in his life. Isaac showed a deeper love for Esau while Rebekah had a stronger love for Jacob. Favoritism is never a good sign for solid relationships (just saying)!

Esau and Jacob related to the birthright in different ways. Esau came across as callous and uncaring and easily outwitted. He seemed to be more concerned for the present moment than for a more secure future. He sold or bartered his birthright to Jacob. Writer does not justify the actions of Jacob but lets Esau bear the responsibility of what happens. Writer presents Jacob as a clever and opportunistic man who knows what he wants. But he took advantage of his brother in need. His hospitality to Esau can be contrasted with the situation between Abraham and Lot. But he covered the legal bases by having Esau swear an inviolable oath.



Chapters 26-27

Isaac is the least known of the ancestral figures. This chapter is the only block of material devoted solely to Isaac. Fact that Esau and Jacob were not yet born indicates editor positioned this in a non-linear form. Contacts Isaac had with Abimelech highlight the promises given to Isaac by God. It also shows the formation of peaceful relationships with *non-chosen* people of the land. There are numerous links between this chapter and the story of Abraham. In some sense Isaac is a mirror of Abraham.

Isaac also left his home in a time of famine and headed to Egypt.
He only got as far as Gerar (in Philistine country) when God appeared to him.
God appeared to Isaac twice.

In both cases God extended to Isaac the same promises given to Abraham.
However, God did not want Isaac to go down to Egypt for relief from the famine (like Abraham).
He was to sojourn (be a resident alien) among the Philistines.
It highlights the blessings of God even in the midst of a famine.

Once more we have an ancestor of Israel trying to pass off his wife as his sister.
In this text fear for his own life (mentioned twice) leads Isaac to do this.
Here (as in Chapter 12) the writer portrays a foreign king in congenial terms.
As with Abraham, Isaac emerged from this potentially disastrous situation unscathed.
His material prosperity occurred quickly in the very midst of a famine.
But his wealth derived only indirectly from the king.
Writer highlights now the activity of God to bless him.

However, not everyone thought well of his blessings.
Wealth of Isaac became the object of envy by the Philistines.
Given this tension, Abimelech believed that Isaac's power endangered his reign.
He asked Isaac to leave the area.
Later Abimelech will initiate better relationships with the more powerful Isaac.
Isaac showed caution at first in view of their history with each other.
But because of what God had done for Isaac he drew Abimelech into a peaceful relationship.
Isaac ignored their differences.

Chapter concludes on a negative note.
Family relationships remained conflicted in spite of peace in the larger community.
We are left with a negative impression of Esau who married two Hittite women without consent.
Both wives make life miserable for both parents.
It predisposes us to be less critical of the moves made by Jacob and Rebekah.
Jacob and Esau never appear together in the four major scenes of this story.
Neither do Rebekah and Esau which symbolizes a lack of communication within the family.

Some scholars often judge the behavior of Isaac as naïve and even bumbling.
But his repeated questions and ritual delays reveal that he was pursuing his suspicions.
He used all the senses available to him to discern the truth.
Isaac never called Jacob by the name of Esau.
Although Isaac reacted strongly when he found out he was tricked Isaac never chided Jacob.
Isaac then reinforces the blessing and links it explicitly with Abraham.
Blessing centers on fertility and land which Jacob will later extend to both Judah and Joseph.

Esau pleaded and begged that his father bless him also.
Isaac responded to his lament with a secondary blessing.
Esau will dwell in an area without rich land and adequate rainfall.
At times he will be subject to his brother and at times he will break free from that yoke.
Statement *qualifies* the blessing of Jacob in response to Esau.

Esau received a blessing (less compared to that of Jacob) but not a curse.

Isaac instructs Jacob not to marry a Canaanite and directs him to go to Haran.

He was to marry a cousin (a daughter of Rebekah's brother, Laban).

Using similar language as in Chapter 17 he blesses Jacob for the journey.

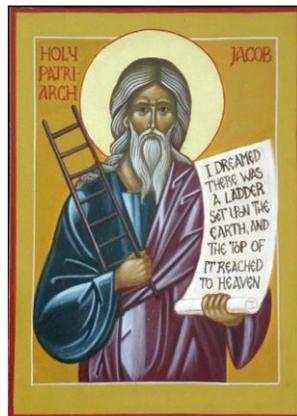
Isaac knowingly and freely blesses Jacob and without reproach for Jacob's deceit.

Meanwhile Esau learned of what had happened to Jacob.

Finally Esau focused on the concern of his father about wives for his sons.

In an effort to please his father he took a third wife from within the family (family of Ishmael).

Esau was back in a favorable light, but he will always remain on the fringes of the family.



Chapter 28

First time Jacob appears by himself and it represents a new beginning for the larger story.

Jacob flees from the hatred and threats of his brother.

At precisely the most vulnerable moment in his life, God appeared (Genesis 28:10-17).

God did not come to judge him but to confirm him as the one chosen to carry on the promise.

God is identified in terms of Jacob's family, referring to Abraham as father rather than Isaac.

Word of God to Jacob moved directly from self-identification to promise.

It constituted confirmation by God of Jacob gaining the birthright and blessing.

Promises this time are quite extensive –

Land / many descendants / posterity throughout the land / extension of blessing to others

Presence of God / safety / homecoming / staying with (focus on status as traveler)

When he woke up Jacob recognized that he had some new knowledge about God.

He moved from not knowing to knowing that God had been present with him.

In that ordinary place he was confronted by the God of whom his father spoke.

He was granted access to the God who spoke promises.

Jacob made a vow which in this case was different than other vows we have seen.

God had already promised unconditionally what Jacob stated as a condition.

By repeating the promise of God in the vow Jacob claimed them as his own.

Jacob wanted to hold God accountable to his promises (those focused specifically on travel).

If God did not do those things then God would not have been faithful.

