

## 13. Isaac

Gen 21-27, 35

If there were no Isaac, it would not be necessary to invent him. He is the only one of the Three Patriarchs who is not renamed in the course of the story. He is mostly passive; things happen *to* him. Narratively speaking, Isaac is largely a way of getting from Abraham to Jacob. His story runs in parallel with that of Abraham, and later, Jacob; there is little in Genesis that is all his own.

### His Name (Gen 21)

Etymologically, it has to do with laughter. Any infant who smiled might be named “Isaac” to preserve that happy omen. Here are the two namings of Isaac:

**Gen 17:7.** Then Abraham fell on his face, and **laughed**, and said in his heart, Shall a child be born unto him that is a hundred years old? and shall Sarah, that is ninety years old, bear? [18] And Abraham said unto God, Oh that Ishmael might live before thee! [19] And God said, Nay, but Sarah thy wife shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name Isaac; and I will establish my covenant with him for an everlasting covenant for his seed after him.

**Gen 21:1.** And Yahweh visited Sarah as he had said, and Yahweh did unto Sarah as he had spoken. [2] And Sarah conceived, and bare Abraham a son in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken to him.[3] And Abraham called the name of his son that was born unto him, whom Sarah bare to him, Isaac. [4] And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. [5] And Abraham was a hundred years old, when his son Isaac was born unto him. [6][ And Sarah said, God hath made me to **laugh**; every one that heareth will laugh with me. [7] And she said, who would have said unto Abraham, that Sarah should give children suck? For I have borne him a son in his old age.

In the first, the laughter is extraneous; “Isaac” is just a name. In the second, and obviously the later, that etymology is developed as Sarah’s actual laughter.

Isaac is not only born, he is born to an old woman. This is a common motif: a son born to a virgin, or to an old woman, will be theologically special. Isaac is younger than Ishmael, Abraham’s son by his concubine Hagar, but will later *replace* Ishmael; this is an instance of the recurring Younger Son motif.

The Biblical writers disapproved of child sacrifice (p27); here is a literarily vivid protest against it. Yahweh has ordered Abraham to sacrifice his son:

**Gen 22:6.** And Abraham took the wood of the burnt-offering, and laid it upon Isaac his son; and he took in his hand the fire and the knife, and they went both of them together. [7] Isaac spake unto Abraham his father, and said, My father; and he said, Here am I, my son. And he said, Behold, the fire and the wood; but where is the lamb for a burnt-offering? [8] And Abraham said, God will provide himself the lamb for a burnt-offering, my son; so they went both of them together . . .

And we can as good as see the two of them, going on together . . .

### His Marriage

Isaac does not seek a wife, instead, a wife is sought for him, by a servant:

**Gen 24:67.** And Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah's tent, and took Rebekah, and she became his wife; and he loved her; and Isaac was comforted after his mother's death.

It would be hard to imagine a less grown-up marriage.

### The Promise

**Gen 26:1** And there was a famine in the land . . . And Isaac went unto Abimelech, king of the Philistines, unto Gerar. And Yahweh appeared unto him, and said, Go not down into Egypt; dwell in the land which I shall show thee of, [3] sojourn in this land, and I will bless thee, for unto thee, and unto thy seed, I will give all these lands, and I will establish the oath which I swear unto Abraham thy father, and I will multiply thy seed as the stars of heaven . . .

There follows the third occurrence of the Wife as Sister motif, which is now little more than a mark of the genre; a signal that we are in an Ancestral story.

### The Deception

This is a masterpiece of suspense. It adds extra tension when Jacob suggests a refinement: make his skin seem rough like Esau's, not smooth like his own.

**Gen 27:1** . . . when Isaac was old, and his eyes were dim, so that he could not see, he called Esau his elder son, and said unto him, My son, and he said unto him, Here am I. [2] And he said, Behold now, I am old; I know not the day of my death. [3] Now therefore take, I pray thee, thy weapons, thy quiver and thy bow, and go out to the field, and take me venison; [4] and make me savory food, such as I love, and bring it to me, that I may eat; that my soul may bless thee before I die. [5] And Rebekah heard when Isaac spake to Esau his son. And Esau went to the field to hunt for venison, and to bring it.

[6] And Rebekah spake unto Jacob her son, saying, Behold, I heard thy father speak unto Esau thy brother, saying, [7] Bring me venison, and make me savory food, that I may eat, and bless thee before Yahweh before my death. [8] Now therefore, my son, obey my voice . . . [9] Go now to the flock, and fetch me from thence two good kids of the goats, and I will make them savory food for thy father, such as he loveth, [10] and thou shalt bring it to thy father, that he may eat, so that he may bless thee before his death.

[11] *And Jacob said to Rebekah his mother, Behold, Esau my brother is a hairy man, and I am a smooth man. [12] My father peradventure will feel me, and I shall seem to him as a deceiver; and I shall bring a curse upon me, and not a blessing. [13] And his mother said unto him, Upon me be thy curse, my son; only obey my voice . . .*

[14] And he went, and fetched, and brought them to his mother; and his mother made savory food, such as his father loved. [15] And Rebekah took the goodly garments of Esau her elder son which were with her in the house, and put them upon Jacob her younger son;

[16] *And she put the skins of the kids of the goats upon his hands, and upon the smooth of his neck,*

[17] and she gave the savory food and the bread, which she had prepared, into the hand of her son Jacob. [18] And he came unto his father, and said, My father, and he said, Here am I; who art thou, my son? [19] And Jacob said unto his father, I am Esau thy first-born; I have done according as thou badest me; arise, I pray thee, sit and eat of my venison, that thy soul may bless me. [20] And Isaac said unto his son, How is it that thou hast found it so quickly, my son? And he said, "Because Yahweh thy god sent me good speed.

[21] *And Isaac said unto Jacob, Come near, I pray thee, that I may feel thee, my son, whether thou be my very son Esau or not.* [22] *And Jacob went near unto Isaac his father, and he felt him, and said, The voice is Jacob's voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau.* [23] *And he discerned him not, because his hands were hairy, as his brother Esau's hands, so he blessed him.*

[24] And he said, Art thou my very son Esau? and he said, I am. [25] And he said, Bring it near to me, and I will eat of my son's venison, that my soul may bless thee. And he brought it near to him, and he did eat; and he brought him wine, and he drank. [26] and his father Isaac said unto him, Come near now, and kiss me, my son. [27] And he came near and kissed him, and he smelled the smell of his raiment, and blessed him, and said,

See, the smell of my son  
is as the smell of a field which Yahweh hath blessed;  
[28] And God give thee of the dew of heaven,  
and of the fatness of the earth,  
and plenty of grain and new wine.  
[29] Let peoples serve thee,  
and nations bow down to thee:  
Be lord over thy brethren,  
and let thy mother's sons bow down to thee:  
Cursed be every one that curseth thee,  
and blessed be every one that blesseth thee.

In the original story, it is smell, not feel, which convinces Isaac that he is dealing with his firstborn, Esau. The goatskin addition, besides being unlikely to give the impression of a "hairy man," is narratively inconsistent.<sup>1</sup>

In the very next sentence,

**Gen 28:1.** Isaac called Jacob and blessed him, and charged him, and said unto him, "Thou shalt not take a wife of the daughters of Canaan. [2] Arise, go to Paddan-aram to the house of Bethuel thy mother's father, and take thee a wife from thence of the daughters of Laban thy mother's brother . . .

Isaac is no longer on his deathbed, and the story is now that of Jacob. When Esau hears that Isaac does not favor Canaanite wives, he takes, "besides the wives he had, the daughter of Ishmael, the sister of Nebaioth." All is amicable; it is as though the whole elaborate Deception scene had never happened.

<sup>1</sup>Be it acknowledged that the 4DH analysis of Bacon **Genesis** 154-159 separates the passages italicized above as coming from "E;" the remainder being derived from "J." It seems as good, if not better, to take them as mere literary enhancement.

Nor is anything much made of Isaac after this. He and Esau had buried their father Abraham, back in Gen 25:

**Gen 25:7** . And these are the days of the years of Abraham's life which he lived, a hundred three-score and fifteen years. [8] And Abraham gave up the ghost, and died in a good old age, an old man, and full of years, and was gathered to his people. [9] And Isaac and Ishmael his sone buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron, the son of Zohar the Hittite, which is before Mamre, [10] the field which Abraham purchased of the children of Heth; there was Abraham buried, and Sarah his wife.

After a long ten-chapter absence from the story, Isaac himself comes to die. It cannot be said that much narrative space is taken up with it. Here is the whole:

**Gen 35:28**. And the days of Isaac were a hundred and fourscore years. [29] And Isaac gave up the ghost, and died, and was gathered to his people, old and full of days; and Esau and Jacob his sons buried him.

It is not even said (though a patch at Gen 49:31 corrects the omission) that they buried him in the same grave as Abraham; the phrase "gathered to his people" is conventional.

The phrase "full of days" invites examination of ages at death. These are:

Abraham: 175 years  
Ishmael: 137 years  
Isaac: 180 years  
Jacob: 147 years

The lifespans of Abraham and Jacob make a descending pattern, as with the Canaanite ancestral figures. Isaac's 180 is half the calendrical 360; as so often, he reflects a different logic than the other two. The servant's search for a wife for Isaac is the template for Jacob's search for Rachel, but is itself artificial. Isaac's near-sacrifice and his deception of Esau can be related to folklore motifs (the deception is a typical "trickster" tale), but Frazer **Folklore**, though he gives much space to both Abraham and Jacob, finds nothing to interest him in Isaac.

**Isaac's God.** Abraham talks with God; Jacob experiences God in a vision, and makes a covenant with that God. Isaac only rarely speaks to God, or is spoken to by him. In old age, his blessings are his own, to give or to withhold.<sup>2</sup> The birth of his sons is marked by no religious formalities such as circumcision.

In sum, Isaac is notably *less God-connected* than the other two Patriarchs. This may be one reason why, as one commentator remarks,

The Isaac of the OT story is weak both in character and portrayal . . . Of the Biblical portrayals, strictly defined, he is patently the least significant.<sup>3</sup>

He is less fully *there*. In what land Isaac was once at home, we do not know.

<sup>2</sup>In Jacob's vision, Yahweh claims himself to be "the God of *Abraham thy father*, and the God of Isaac" (Gen 28:13); this *skips over Isaac*, supposedly Jacob's real father. For one moment, we may get a glimpse of a possibly original two-Patriarch tradition.

<sup>3</sup>IDB (Hicks).