

The Isaac story and its significance for the narrative of Genesis.

Jonathan Appleby, March 2007

The narrative of Genesis 12-50 has the form of a family history of the patriarchs. There has been much debate about the genre of the narrative and whether the stories therein should be classed as biography or legend or a combination of the two. However it is likely that the narrative is describing 'real historical people, not make-believe figures'.¹

Isaac is a key figure in the history of the patriarchs from Abraham through to Joseph. Isaac's part in that history begins in chapter 17 with the foretelling of his birth, and ends in chapter 35 with his death at the age of 180. The principal events in the Isaac story will be analysed in turn below.

God appears to Abraham in chapter 17, re-affirming his covenant and confirming his earlier promise in 15:6, stating 'You will be the father of many nations' (17:4). He goes on to say that 'Sarah will bear you a son, and you will call him Isaac' (17:19). Isaac is thus very unusual in having been named by God himself, and the name Isaac (meaning 'he laughs') is a pun on the temporary disbelief of Abraham and Sarah.

God's promise to Abraham is fulfilled in chapter 21 with Isaac's birth 'at the very time God had promised him' (21:2). Isaac's birth is the cause of much joy and is miraculous, demonstrating that it was brought about on God's initiative.

¹ Gordon Wenham, *Exploring the Old Testament: The Pentateuch* (SPCK, 2003), p.37.

Perhaps the most significant event in Isaac's life is described in chapter 22, when Abraham takes his son to the region of Moriah to sacrifice him in obedience to God's command. The command 'Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love...' (22:2) emphasises both Abraham's love for Isaac and the uniqueness of Isaac as the 'only son' of the promises which God had made to Abraham. The dialogue between Abraham and Isaac as they approach Moriah is sparse, and yet it clearly conveys a wealth of meaning – faith, anguish, innocence – and a vivid mental picture of the scene. Commentaries make much of Abraham's obedience in sorely trying circumstances; however Isaac himself, by now possibly an adolescent or young man, was also obedient. He assisted in the preparations for the sacrifice and allowed himself to be bound and placed on the altar. Isaac did not have the benefit of hindsight which we have in reading chapter 22, and yet he does not appear to have protested! Matthew Henry says 'we do not find that he attempted to make his escape or made any resistance. Yet it is necessary that a sacrifice be bound'.² At the last moment God intervenes, and provides Abraham with a ram for the sacrifice, introducing the idea of a substitutionary sacrifice. In response to Abraham's ultimate act of faith and obedience, God re-affirms his promises to bless in 22:15-18.

The story moves on to chapter 24, when Abraham arranges for a wife to be found for Isaac. Abraham's servant, searching for a wife for Isaac, finds God answering his prayers even before he has finished praying them (24:12-15). Isaac takes little part in the proceedings until 24:62-67, when he meets Rebekah

² Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary for the NIV*, revising editor Gerald Peterman (Harper Collins, 1992), p.42.

and they are married. The picture is painted of a godly man who is patient; godly because Isaac is described as 'meditating' when Rebekah approaches (24:63), and patient because he is prepared to wait until he is 40 years old for God's timing to be fulfilled.

A common feature of the patriarchal narratives is difficulty in conception, with Sarah, Rebekah and then Rachel having to wait many years before a son arrives. In chapter 25 Isaac prays to God on behalf of Rebekah, and God answers his prayer; Jacob and Esau are born after a twenty-year wait.

A famine strikes the land in chapter 26. Isaac is possibly tempted to do as his father Abraham did in 12:10 and go to Egypt to escape the famine. But God appears to him, telling him to 'Stay in this land for a while, and I will be with you and will bless you' (26:3). Isaac does stay, and chapter 26 relates how God did indeed bless him abundantly, to the point where his Philistine neighbours envied him. Isaac moves on to Beersheba, where again God appears to him and re-affirms his promises. Earlier in the chapter, whilst living in Gerar, Isaac pretends that Rebekah is his sister because she is beautiful and he fears for his safety (26:7). William Still states that Isaac is 'put to shame by a pagan king with a high moral code', and notes that God uses that king Abimelech to rebuke Isaac for his fear.³

By chapter 27, Isaac is about 100 years old and has failing eyesight. At this point is the well-known story about Jacob obtaining Isaac's blessing by deception. The

³ William Still, *Collected Writings Volume 3: Genesis and Romans*, ed. by David C. Searle and Sinclair B. Ferguson (Christian Focus/Rutherford House, 2000), p.120.

emphasis in the story then shifts to Jacob and his lengthy sojourn in Haran, from which he finally returns by the end of chapter 35. Isaac dies aged 180 years in Mamre, 'old and full of years' (35:29).

The preceding paragraphs described the main features of Isaac's life. The wider significance of Isaac's life for the narrative of Genesis will now be discussed.

The Isaac story is of central significance in the development of the covenant between God and the patriarchs. In Genesis 12:1-3 God speaks to Abram and promises to make him into a great nation, a blessing to all peoples on earth. Abram is obedient to God's command to leave Ur and move to Canaan. This theme of God's promises and Abram's obedience continues in chapter 17, where God speaks extensively to Abraham of his covenant, including the words 'my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you by this time next year' (17:21). The key passage of the sacrifice of Isaac in chapter 22 is as we have seen a supreme act of faith and obedience, and results in God emphatically re-affirming his promises in 22:15-18. Gordon Wenham notes that 'It could be said that the original promises made in chapter 12 have now been turned into guarantees thanks to Abraham's obedience'.⁴ God continues to underline his promises throughout Isaac's life; for example in 26:23-24 God appears to Isaac and promises that 'I am with you; I will bless you and will increase the number of your descendants'. A key message of the narrative is that the covenant requires both God's promise and man's obedience.

⁴ Gordon Wenham, *Exploring the Old Testament: The Pentateuch*, p.43.

The sacrifice of Isaac is also of significance because it demonstrates a principle of sacrifice: Isaac was offered as a willing sacrifice, and so God accepted an animal in his place and blessed Abraham and Isaac. It is possible that part of the significance of this event lies in the fact that human sacrifice is prevented by God; it is known that other religions of that day had human sacrifice as part of their ritual, and this passage helps to draw a clear distinction between those other religions and the worship of the true God.

A wider significance of the sacrifice of Isaac is as a type of Christ's death. Although outside the remit of this essay there are many parallels, both in the principle and in the detail of the story. For instance, Isaac carries the wood for the sacrifice up Mount Moriah; Christ carried his cross near that same place. In commenting on this, Origen says 'to carry "the wood for the burnt offering" is the duty of a priest. He (Isaac) therefore becomes victim and priest'.⁵ Isaac is here prefiguring Christ's work at the cross.

Throughout these chapters, Abraham and Isaac are presented as models for the reader of Genesis to imitate. Their examples of obedience and faith are noted above, as is Isaac's portrayal as a godly and patient man in chapter 24. Isaac does, however, make mistakes, most notably in his deception of king Abimelech in chapter 26 noted above. Abraham had on two previous occasions made that same mistake, which makes Isaac's actions more remarkable. It is possible that Isaac's deception (which probably occurred before the birth of Jacob and Esau) was the reason why God had allowed Rebekah to remain barren for 20 years.

⁵ Origen, 'Homilies on Genesis 8.6', in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament II: Genesis 12-50*, ed. by Mark Sheridan (IVP, 2002), p.104-5.

In Genesis, as in the Old Testament generally, land is a very significant issue. As noted earlier, Isaac stayed in Gerar rather than going down to Egypt during the famine in chapter 26. God blessed him abundantly as a result of this. This is an instance of God's blessing to the patriarchs being related to location; Still states that 'only in the land of promise can Jehovah bless them with His presence and His prosperity'.⁶

The overall direction of the message of Genesis 12-50 can usefully be seen by reference to God's promise in 12:1-3. The four main elements of that promise concern land, descendants, special relationship with God, and blessing for the nations. In the story of Isaac we can see the very beginnings of the fulfilment of these elements of promise; a foot-hold in the land, albeit tenuous, and a continuation of the line to Jacob, after whom we see a swift multiplication of descendants. We can clearly see Isaac's godly life and his relationship with his God, and we also see small signs of the blessing of the nations during Isaac's time in Gerar.

In conclusion, we have seen that although Isaac may not feature quite so prominently as Abraham or Jacob or Joseph in the Genesis narrative, he is nevertheless a vital link in the development of the nation of Israel and in God's dealings with that nation, and there is much that can be learned from studying his life story.

⁶ William Still, *Collected Writings Volume 3: Genesis and Romans*, p.119.

Bibliography

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