

The Patriarchs of Israel

Week 5

Isaac

Chapter 21. Isaac (“one laughs”) was the only son of Abraham by Sarah, and the second of three Hebrew patriarchs who were the progenitors of the Jewish people. He was born in the south country, probably Beersheba (21:14, 31), when Abraham was 100 and Sarah 90 years old (17:17; 21:5). He was named Isaac because both Abraham and Sarah had laughed incredulously at the thought of having a child at their age (17:17-19; 18:9-15; 21:6). His birth must be regarded as a miracle. It was 25 years after God had promised the childless Abraham and Sarah a son, that the promise was fulfilled. He is thus rightly called the child of promise, in contrast with Ishmael, who was born of Hagar, Sarah's maid, and Abraham. When he was eight days old, Isaac was circumcised as the first child of God's promise (21:4).

Chapter 22. God commanded Abraham to offer Isaac as a sacrifice on a mountain in the land of Moriah. His exact age then is not stated, but he is described as a “young man,” able to carry up the mountain-side the wood for the burnt offering. Bound upon the altar and about to be slain, he was spared when an angel of the Lord interposed and substituted for him a ram, which was offered in his stead. Isaac's position as the heir of the promise was confirmed by the renewal of the promise on that occasion.

Chapter 24. The account of the central event of Isaac's life is prefaced by the genealogies of Abraham's brother in Haran (22:20-24) and the death of Sarah, who died at Hebron when Isaac was 37 years old (23:1). That event caused Abraham, now an old man, to think of his duty to obtain a wife for his son (24:3, 67). The wife could be found only among the cousins at Haran if the purity of descent was to be maintained and the family distinguished from surrounding clans. Abraham's trusted servant (Eliezer?) was sent there and found Rebekah, whose hand he sought in the approved way of arranged marriages. The match was accomplished under divine guidance (vv. 7, 12, 26-27, 50, 56). The first meeting of Isaac and Rebekah is described with the tender interest natural to blood descendants (vv. 62-67).

Chapter 25. Isaac was 40 when he married Rebekah, but he and his wife were childless until, in answer to his prayer, twin sons, Esau and Jacob, were born to them when Isaac was 60 (25:20, 26). Like his father Abraham, Isaac learned of the faithfulness of God in this matter. Before they were born, the diverse characters and future separation of his sons to head opposing nations were predicted (v. 23).

Chapter 26. When there was famine in the land, the natural reaction of the inhabitants of the south was to look to Egypt for food. Abraham and later Joseph's brothers went there for corn, and Isaac intended to do so (26:2). At this time of distress, the covenant promises were reiterated and confirmed to Isaac (vv. 2-5). Although he was prevented from going to Egypt, he copied his father in telling the men of Gerar that Rebekah was his sister (v. 7). The deception likewise failed, but his status, wealth, and the size of his household served to protect him from attack by the local peoples, especially in disputes over watering rights (vv. 25-33).

Chapter 27. The last prominent event in the life of Isaac is the blessing of his sons (ch. 27). Esau, the elder, was his father's favorite, even though God had told him that the elder would serve the younger, while Rebekah's favorite was Jacob (25:28). When he was over 100 years old and dim of sight, perhaps thinking that his end was near, he desired to bestow his last blessing upon his elder son; but through Rebekah's cunning and guile, Jacob the younger supplanted his brother, and the blessing of the birthright was bestowed upon him. To save Jacob from the murderous wrath of Esau, who determined to kill him after his father's death, Rebekah induced Isaac to send Jacob to Mesopotamia, so that, after his own example, his son might take a wife from among his own kindred, and not imitate Esau by marriage with Canaanite women. Isaac invoked another blessing upon the head of Jacob and sent him away to Laban, Rebekah's brother, in Paddan-Aram (27:1—28:5).

Isaac is mentioned only once more when, 20 years later, Jacob returned from his sojourn in Mesopotamia, having married into Laban's family. Jacob found the old man at Mamre in Hebron, and there Isaac died, 180 years old, and his two sons, Esau and Jacob, buried him (35:27-29).

The New Testament refers to Isaac 19 times. His "sacrifice" by Abraham is mentioned twice, in Hebrews 11:17, 18 and James 2:21; but while the submission of Isaac is mentioned, the stress is upon the triumph of Abraham's faith.

Of the three patriarchs, Isaac was the least conspicuous, traveled the least, had the fewest extraordinary adventures, and lived the longest. Prior to his marriage, Isaac's life is a part of the story of Abraham; after his marriage, it merges into that of his children, emphasizing his role as an intermediary. He was free from violent passions; quiet, gentle, dutiful; less a man of action than of thought and suffering. His name is always joined in equal honor with Abraham and Jacob.

Jacob

"A wandering Aramean was my father" (Deut. 26:5). This is an apt description of Jacob's history, which may be considered in four sections according to his place of residence.

A. Early Life in Canaan (Chapters 25—27)

The conception of Isaac's sons is remarkable in that it did not occur until twenty years after his marriage to Rebekah. As Abraham had been required to exercise faith in the promise of an heir, so was Isaac. The peculiar nature of his birth may have given Jacob his name, but even earlier he was designated as the chosen son through whom the promise given to Abraham should pass. Although born in Canaan, he was racially distinct, being the grandson of a man from Ur of the Chaldees, a Semite among the descendants of Ham.

The relationship of Esau and Jacob, twin brothers and full-born sons of Isaac, could not be eased by such a separation as divided Isaac and Ishmael. Later teachings (e.g., Mal. 1:2f.) show that it was by the sovereign will of God that one was chosen over the other. The supremacy of God over human customs was exemplified by the choice of Jacob, the younger son. The contrast between the two brothers may be seen as the contrast between the agriculturalist and the nomad-hunter who lives "from hand to mouth." These were the characteristics of the later nations of Israel and Edom. Esau's thoughtlessness cost him his birthright (the privilege of the firstborn son to inherit a double share of the paternal estate), thus allowing Jacob the material superiority. His equally heedless marriage to local women of Hittite stock (Gen. 26:34) rendered him unsuitable to become the father of the chosen people. Nevertheless, Isaac intended to bestow the blessing of the firstborn upon Esau. The oracle given to Rebekah before the birth of her sons (25:23) probably encouraged her to counter Isaac's will and to gain the blessing for her favorite son by a fraud. The blessing that was given to Jacob conveyed the status of head of the family, apparently apart from the status of heir. Esau had disposed of this many years before. The blessing, once pronounced, was irrevocable; Jacob was sent to the safety of Rebekah's home until Esau should forgive him.

B. To Paddan-Aram (Chapters 28—30)

Chapter 28. Jacob was well over forty years old when he left home. For Esau had already married at the age of forty (26:34; 27:46). The journey from Beersheba may be reckoned, however, as the commencement of his life as an individual. He had received the paternal blessing, and doubtless knew of the God who had made great promises to his father and to his grandfather; yet it was not until he slept at Luz that he realized that he was required to participate in the fulfillment of these promises. He was following the road to the north along the central hills when night fell, and he lay down with a convenient stone at his head. The text does not indicate that he had arrived at a recognized shrine, although Abraham had built an altar in that region (12:8) and archaeological evidence suggests that it was an ancient holy place.

In a dream, God revealed Himself to Jacob and renewed the promise to him by His name Yahweh, the name in which the promise had first been given. The traveler was given reassurance for his journey and of his eventual return. The erection of a stone pillar, this time only a small boulder, was a common practice for commemoration of some notable event. For Jacob this place was henceforth sanctified as “the gate of heaven” where God first communicated with him. It was for him Beth-El, “the dwelling of God.”

Chapter 29. Jacob moved northward to the “fields of Aram” (*Paddan-Aram*). The relatives of Bethuel were evidently prosperous citizens of Haran who cultivated the land surrounding the town in the valley and pastured their flocks on the hills. Jacob was welcomed into his mother's family. An agreement was made that he should give seven years of service and then take as his wife his cousin Rachel, whom he had first met at the well outside the town. When the day of Jacob's marriage arrived, Rachel's father Laban substituted his elder daughter Leah, on the plea of a local custom that the elder was always first. Perhaps the narrator knew of another reason: Leah had “weak eyes” (29:17), i.e., she was not beautiful, so it might have been more difficult to find a suitable husband for her. After the week of celebration had passed, Rachel also was given to Jacob. He had to promise another seven years of service in return. Jacob remained in Laban's employ for six years after he had worked out his contract in order to earn sufficient capital for the support of his family.

Chapter 30. Leah bore his first four sons (Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah). Rachel, jealous of her sister since she herself was barren and eager to remove that reproach, gave her maid Bilhah to her husband. By this means, which was an accepted practice at the time (cf. Abraham and Hagar), any child born would be counted as Rachel's (30:3). The two sons borne by Bilhah were named by Rachel, as if they were her own, Dan and Naphtali. Leah then did likewise with her maid Zilpah, who bore two sons, named by her mistress Gad and Asher. At this juncture Reuben, Leah's firstborn and now about twelve years old, found mandrakes, which he brought to his mother. Rachel purchased this herb from her sister for its supposed aphrodisiac qualities. As a result of the bargain, Leah bore two more sons to Jacob, Issachar and Zebulun, and at some time a daughter, Dinah. Then at last Rachel gave birth to her first son Joseph.

Now Jacob pressed for permission to return to Canaan. Laban could not afford to lose so good a herdsman and offered him any wage he cared to name. Yet even when Jacob had suggested his reward, Laban tried to avoid payment. The evasion was overcome by Jacob's experience with the flocks. He succeeded in breeding fine sheep of the type he had asked from Laban, while his father-in-law was left with inferior stock. This prosperity aroused the jealousy of Laban's own sons and of Laban himself. Rachel and Leah supported their husband when he related to them the divine command to return to his father's home. They claimed that their father had not given them any dowry but had spent it instead, treating them as foreigners.

C. Return to Canaan (Chapters 31—33)

Chapter 31. Jacob departed while Laban and his sons were away shearing sheep in the hills. Thereby he gained a two-day head start, and it was not until he reached the highlands of Gilead that Laban overtook him. The seven days indicated as the time taken by Laban's party to cover about 400 miles from Haran to Gilead are within the capabilities of good riding camels. Jacob, with his family and his flocks, took a little longer. Laban complained that he had had no opportunity to bid farewell to his daughters with the accustomed feasting. More important, he wanted to find the “gods” that had been stolen (31:30, 32). These “gods” (Hebrew *teraphim*, vv. 19, 34) were almost certainly small metal or terra-cotta figures of deities which are commonly found in the ruins of ancient towns. Possession of these images was vested in the head of the family, according to evidence from Nuzi. Certain texts specify that they were to pass to the son of the owner upon the latter's decease rather than to an adopted son, even if he had been made principal heir.

Rachel's theft can now be seen as an attempt to obtain for her husband the status of head of the household. Laban's anxiety arose partly from this consideration and partly from the loss of the magical protection they were thought to provide. This value may well have been in Rachel's mind, too, as she took them with her at the outset of a long journey. Divine command prevented Laban from using force against Jacob, and his daughter's ingenuity deprived him of his gods.

No fault could be found in Jacob's conduct in Haran either. In his own defense (31:36-42) he mentioned that he had not eaten any of Laban's rams and had himself replaced those animals seized by wild beasts. Records from Nuzi describe the prosecution of shepherds who had made their own use of their masters' flocks. The Babylonian laws of Hammurabi (ca. 1750 B.C.) imposed a fine of ten times the value of the animal taken on a shepherd convicted of such an offense. By the same laws, however, the loss of an animal killed by a marauding lion was to be borne not by the herdsman but by the owner.

Laban could do little but suggest a pact of friendship with his son-in-law. He proposed as terms of the treaty that Jacob should neither ill-treat his wives nor marry any other women, a clause often found in marriage records of this time. Moreover, the site of the covenant was to be a boundary which neither party should cross with evil intent. Ancient treaties frequently stipulated that rulers of states should not permit raids from their territory into the neighboring country and that they should be responsible for the punishment of any of their subjects who did so raid. Such treaties were solemnized by the naming of various important deities as witnesses and the deposit of a copy in a temple. The covenant of Jacob and Laban was ratified solely by the invocation of the God of Abraham and of their common ancestor Terah. If either Jacob or Laban broke the terms of the agreement, the curse of God would fall upon him. The cairn and the pillar were visible expressions of the treaty, reminding them of it if ever they passed that way again. When a treaty was to be recorded, a picture was carved, on some occasions, representing the contracting parties sharing a meal to indicate their unanimity and good faith, as Jacob and his kin ate together in Gilead on this occasion (31:54).

Chapter 32. The parting from Laban marked another stage in Jacob's development. He was now head of his own household. He also climbed to a higher plane of spiritual experience. An encounter with angels at Mahanaim ("two camps") impressed upon him the might of the God who protected him, encouraging him for the journey southward to meet Esau. His brother's seemingly hostile advance prompted a call for clear evidence of God's guarding. Shrewdly, he sent a handsome gift to his brother and strategically divided his group into two parts; so large had his following become that each would be able to defend itself, or to escape if the other was captured. When all had crossed the stream of the Jabbok, Jacob was hindered by a stranger. The two struggled without one gaining advantage on the other, until the adversary dislocated Jacob's hip. Jacob still refused to release his antagonist, but, clinging to him, demanded his blessing. This could not be given until the stranger knew Jacob's name. By telling it, Jacob acknowledged his defeat. His opponent, still incognito, could command him as an individual. He emphasized his superiority by renaming the patriarch. No longer was he the man whose name had an unfavorable connotation. He became Israel, the one on whose behalf "God strove" or "God strives" and with whom "God strove." The withholding of the adversary's name, perhaps, caused Jacob to realize whom he had met. So Jacob called the place Peniel ("face of God"), "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved" (32:30).

Chapter 33. Jacob's fear of meeting his brother proved groundless. Esau was content to forget the wrongs of the past and to share his life with his brother. The juncture of their two households would bring them greater security and standing among the alien peoples around them. As two men of so contrary natures were unlikely to live together long in harmony, Jacob chose the better course in turning westward, leaving the road to Edom. Succoth was the first halting place before the Jordan was crossed. The length of his stay there is not indicated. It may be that the cattle were breeding and it was necessary to stop and provide shelter for them (33:17). (These articles on Isaac and Jacob were extracts from Alan R. Millard, "Isaac" and "Jacob," in *ISBE*, Vol. 2 [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982], 883-884 and 948-952, resp.)