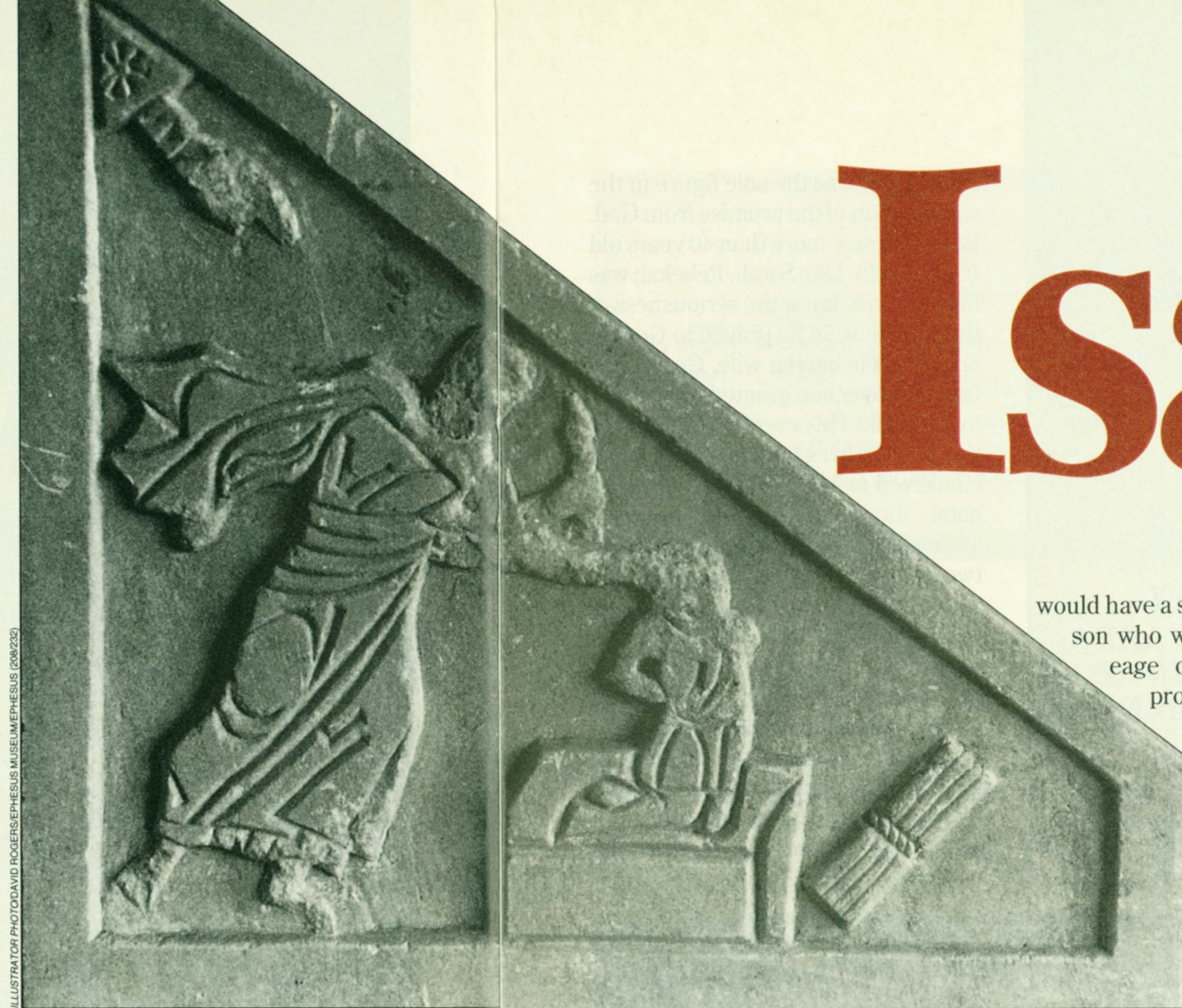


Isaac

Ronald E. Bishop



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO DAVID ROGERS/EPHESUS MUSEUM/EPHESUS (2008/230)

Above: A 6th century A.D. bas-relief from a Byzantine banister depicting Abraham preparing to slay Isaac.

PEOPLE WHO MARRY USUALLY spend a brief time together alone before children are born. But the arrival of children marks a new stage in the marriage, as well as a time of personal adjustment. Most parents wonder, or even state aloud, "Life surely would be different without our children."

Abraham and Sarah were much like modern couples in this regard. They anticipated the coming of children for years. According to Genesis 15:2, Sarah was barren. One cannot overestimate the importance of children to ancient people. The contemporaries of Abraham and Sarah had no well-defined concept of an afterlife. So, the best they hoped for was that after death, a person's memory would live on in one's children. The worth of a wife was judged by whether she had borne a male child into the marriage.

Part of God's promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:2 was to make of him "a great nation." This promise assumed that Abraham and Sarah would have children. Abraham obeyed God, taking his barren wife to Canaan. There God renewed His promise to Abraham, but Abraham was concerned about his lack of children (see Gen. 15:1-6). At that time the most eligible person to be Abraham's heir was a slave named Eliezer. God promised Abraham that his own son would be his heir, not Eliezer. With all visible evidence against him, Abraham believed God.

Sarah and Abraham became impatient in waiting for a son. They devised a scheme by which Abraham would help Sarah's handmaid, Hagar, conceive a child. The plan was successful, and Ishmael was born. But God again told Abraham that Sarah

would have a son. Isaac would be the son who would carry on the lineage of Abraham, and the promise of God.

As God promised, Isaac was born when Abraham was 100 years old and Sarah was 90 (Gen. 17:17). Abraham circumcised Isaac on his eighth day of life to mark him as a son of the covenant with God. The couple named the son "Isaac," which means "laughter," to remind them of the joy he brought them. The name also reminded them that they each had laughed when God told them they would have a son (see Gen. 17:17; 18:12).

Perhaps the best-known story in the Bible involving Isaac is found in Genesis 22. In this account of the testing of Abraham, God commanded him to take Isaac and offer him as a burnt offering. Two interpretations of this story are widely accepted. The literal interpretation states that God actually commanded Abraham to offer Isaac as a burnt offering. Hebrews 11:17-19 may suggest support for this view. Yet, many students of the Bible see a difficulty with this interpretation, especially in light of Jeremiah 19:5, which states that God never commanded human sacrifice,

neither did it come into His mind.

Isaac is a central character in the story of Genesis 22. He was Abraham's obedient son who already had a relationship of trust with God. The risk to Isaac's life put God's promise in jeopardy. But Abraham passed the test, and Isaac was spared by God's mercy.

Because of the importance of the promise from God, Abraham could not bear the thought of Isaac's marriage to a Canaanite woman. Abraham knew that Isaac needed a wife from among his own people. But Abraham did not allow Isaac to search for his own wife. Abraham did not want to take a chance on Isaac's settling in a foreign land.

Abraham sent a servant from Canaan to Mesopotamia to find a wife for Isaac (Gen. 24:1-67). Isaac's trust in his father's judgment as seen in Genesis 22 is echoed in chapter 24. Isaac trusted his father and the servant to make this important decision. This quality of trust and assurance characterizes the Isaac one meets throughout Genesis.

The search for Isaac's wife is intriguing. The servant asked for God's guidance in his search. God honored the test outlined by the servant, and the lovely Rebekah was chosen as a wife for Isaac. Though they were re-

Lesson reference

L&W: Genesis 17:19; 22:2;
24:4,67; 25:11a



Below right: Bedouin tent in camp. Opposite page: Chart showing the lineage of the patriarchs.

25:8), Isaac was the sole figure in the continuation of the promise from God. Isaac was now more than 40 years old (Gen. 25:20). Like Sarah, Rebekah was barren. Isaac knew the seriousness of this situation, so he prayed to God on behalf of his barren wife. God heard Isaac's prayer and granted conception to Rebekah. This event would change the couple's lives forever, for Rebekah conceived twins. Apparently the prenatal movement of the children alarmed Rebekah. God told her that two nations resided in her womb. He also foresaw constant competition between them, with the younger emerging as the stronger (see Gen. 25:23).

The two sons born to Isaac and Rebekah were Jacob and Esau. Isaac and Rebekah each chose a different son for a favorite. Isaac favored Esau, for he was a man of the wild. Rebekah chose Jacob, who was a quiet man who preferred a more social life. Jacob

luctant, Rebekah's family sent her away with their blessings. The servant led her to Beerlahairoi where Isaac was meditating (Gen. 24:63). With great suspense, the story unfolds with Rebekah asking the servant, "Who is that man yonder, walking in the field to meet us?" (Gen. 24:65, RSV). Perhaps she had seen something in the man she admired. Rebekah was pleased to learn that the man was Isaac, her future husband. The character of Isaac is illustrated in the statement that he "took Rebekah, and she became his wife; and he loved her" (Gen. 24:67). Isaac's time was one in which many men viewed women as mere property. Isaac evidently was a perceptive man who saw through this deficient view of women, because his love for Rebekah clearly was genuine.

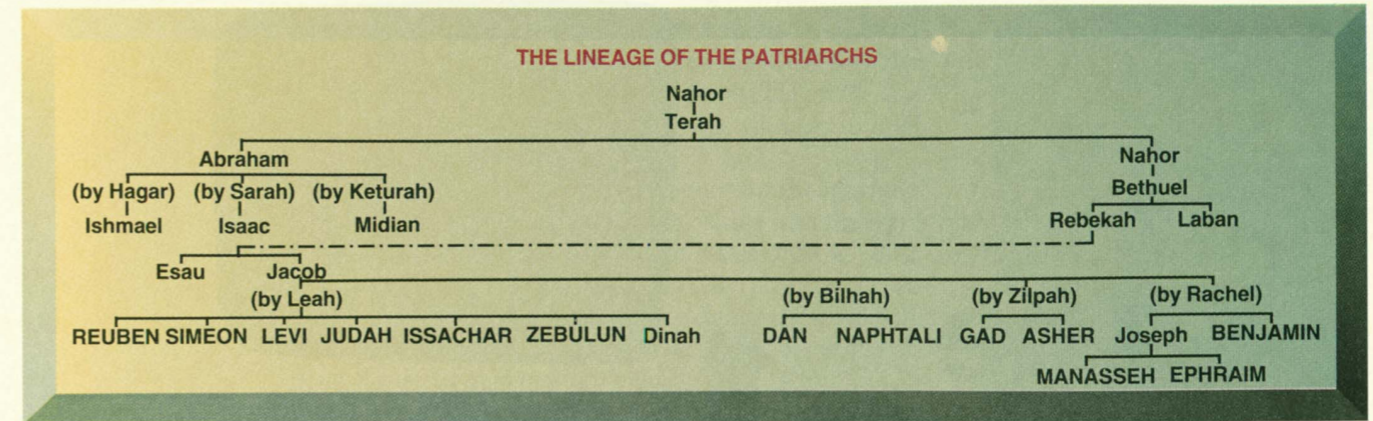
Sometime after Isaac married, Abraham died. Abraham seems to have lived several years after Sarah's death, for he married Keturah (Gen. 25:1) and fathered at least six more children. But Abraham gave all he had



to Isaac (v. 5). After Isaac and his half brother Ishmael buried their father, Isaac lived in Beerlahairoi (Gen. 25:11). There God remembered His promise to Isaac, for He blessed him greatly.

After Abraham's death (Gen.

soon began to display his penchant for greed and avarice. One time after a day of unsuccessful hunting, Esau came home tired and hungry. Jacob was preparing a pot of pottage and offered to give Esau some, only if he surrendered his birthright. So began



Jacob's domination of Esau.

Isaac also is known for his shrewdness and success. Due to a famine, he settled in Gerar, a Philistine city. There God warned him not to go into Egypt as his father had done. Instead, Isaac remained in Gerar, and God extended to Isaac the Abrahamic promise. In Gerar, Isaac resorted to one of Abraham's tricks, telling the men of the region that Rebekah was his sister. The king discerned that Rebekah was his wife, yet he did not banish Isaac as Pharaoh had done to Abraham.

While in Gerar, Isaac became a successful farmer as a result of God's blessing. His wealth became an impediment in his relationship with the Philistines, and they envied him (Gen. 26:14). The animosity became so great that the Philistines filled up the wells that Abraham's servants had dug, cutting off Isaac's water supply. The tension resulted in a formal request by Abimelech, king in Gerar, that Isaac leave the area.

Isaac complied with the request and left, dwelling instead in a valley near Gerar. There he renewed the wells that had been filled in, as well as digging new ones. The Philistines coveted Isaac's wells; so Isaac moved on, digging new wells as he went. The most remembered well dug by Isaac and his servants was in or near the town of Beersheba. Abimelech noticed that Isaac had prospered and that God

evidently was with him. Abimelech found Isaac at Beersheba and again made a treaty with him. Abimelech wanted to remain in good standing with this man of faith and success.

One ancient custom that is portrayed vividly in Isaac's life is the paternal blessing of children. Genesis 27 tells the story of Isaac's intention to bless Esau, his favorite son. Isaac had grown almost blind, but he still had a fancy for wild game. He instructed Esau to prepare a meal of wild game for him. Isaac planned to bless Esau after the meal. Rebekah was listening to the conversation and quickly devised a scheme to place Jacob ahead of Esau. She persuaded Jacob to pretend to be Esau, even down to the details of disguising his smooth skin to seem hairy like Esau's. Jacob felt and smelled like Esau, and the food met Isaac's expectations. Though Isaac suspected that something was amiss, the ploy worked; and Jacob received his father's blessing.

No sooner had Jacob departed than Esau entered the room. Esau and Isaac soon discovered the trick, but nothing could be done. Isaac had tried to bless Esau by pronouncing a promise of servitude on Jacob (see Gen. 27:29). The plan had backfired, and Jacob had tricked Esau out of his father's blessing. Now Esau's birthright and blessing belonged to Jacob.

Rebekah saw a way for Jacob to escape Esau's wrath. She told him to

go to her brother Laban in Haran and wait until Esau cooled down. She then prompted Isaac to encourage Jacob to go to the people of their ancestors in search of a wife. Jacob traveled to Paddan-aram and found there two wives, Leah and Rachel. After working for their father for 20 years, Jacob returned to Canaan. There he was reconciled to his brother Esau. He also was able to visit with his father again briefly before Isaac died.

Some people have noted that Isaac filled an uncomfortable place between a famous father and a famous son. His life was rather uneventful compared with Abraham and Jacob. Yet, he proved his faith to God and his loyalty to his family as he carried on God's promise. Isaac displayed a notable example as a husband but had serious problems as a father. His influence on deceitful Jacob was realized only in the later years of this son's life.

Isaac could have taken on a selfish and conceited character, knowing that he was the choice son of promise. He was preferred to Ishmael and to the sons of Keturah. Yet, he persisted in living a consistent and contented life. He proved to be a good neighbor and businessman. Perhaps to say that Isaac was the son of Abraham and the father of Jacob is no small epitaph.

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