

# Isaac

## Contents

**Isaac** (ī zək [Heb *yīṣḥāq*, *yīśhāq*—either ‘laughing,’ ‘he laughs,’ or ‘he laughed’; Gk *Isaak*]). An OT patriarch, son of Abraham and father of Jacob and Esau.

**I. Significance of the Name** Whether *yīṣḥāq* is to be taken as an imperfect or as a past tense, it is necessary to consider the subject of the verb. The most common solution is to supply *ēl*, “God,” as the subject. It might then be understood as indicating divine benevolence, or else the fearful laughter of God’s scorn for His enemies (Ps. 2:4). A strong objection to this analysis is that the name is never so written in the text preserved; cf. Albright (FSAC, p. 245), who translates Heb *yīṣḥāq-ēl* “May El smile favorably upon me in my distress.” The narratives concerning the promise and the birth of Isaac suggest that some person may be the subject: his father (Gen. 17:17); his mother (Gen. 18:12–15; separation from the specific subject might result in the name taking the simple masculine form *yīṣḥāq* and not the feminine *tīṣḥāq*); or “everyone who hears” (Gen. 21:6). Other occurrences of the root in the Isaac stories cannot be connected with his naming since they followed that event (Gen. 21:9; 26:8). The name may well be understood as indefinite, “one laughs,” or, since Abraham named his son, it may refer back to his own incredulous laughter, “he laughed.”

**II. Family** The two events of Isaac’s life that Genesis treats in detail emphasize his significance as the heir of the covenant first made with his father and as the one whose son was to become the nation Israel.

**A. Birth and Position**The birth of Isaac was peculiar in several respects: the age of his par-

ents, the purity of his lineage, the special divine promises. In the birth of Isaac (when his mother was ninety and his father one hundred years old [Gen. 17:17]) may be seen the faithfulness of Yahweh, who had promised an heir twenty-five years before (Gen. 12:1–4). His mother was not only Abraham’s wife but also his half sister, so Isaac was a member of the family of Terah on both sides. As son of Sarah, Isaac had legal precedence over Ishmael; but Hagar’s son could be excluded from inheriting along with Isaac only by the explicit command to expel him from the family (Gen. 21:11–14).

**B. Relation to the Religious Birthright**The removal of Ishmael and of Abraham’s other sons (Gen. 25:1–6) avoided a division of Abraham’s material wealth at his death and ensured that Isaac alone would inherit the blessings associated with the Promised Land. It also avoided the possibility of disagreement and difficulties arising from subjection to Isaac. Some sense of the importance of the spiritual inheritance is evident in Isaac’s relationship to his sons. Although he favored the elder, he could not withdraw the blessing he had bestowed upon the younger son, but rather recognized that this was in accordance with the divine plan and confirmed it (Gen. 28:3f).

**III. Biography** 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.

As he was the first child of God’s promise, Isaac was the first to receive the sign of circumcision at the prescribed age of eight days; and his survival to the end of weaning (perhaps at the age of two) was marked by a great feast. These indications of the important position he held underline the enor-

mous sacrifice later demanded of Abraham. Isaac was probably fully grown at the time and evidently familiar with the act of sacrifice (Gen. 22:7). The divine interposition to save the one who was thus devoted to God constituted him afresh the heir of the promise, confirmed by its renewal on that occasion.

The account of the central event of Isaac's life is prefaced by the genealogies of Abraham's brother in Haran (Gen. 22:20–24) and the death of Sarah, an event that caused Abraham, an old man, to think of his duty to obtain a wife for his son (Gen. 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. Eliezer was sent there and found Rebekah, whose hand he sought in the approved way (*see* Marriage IV.B.2). The match was accomplished under divine guidance. The first meeting of Isaac and Rebekah is described at the close of Gen. 24 with the tender interest natural to blood descendants.

If the phrase "these are the generations of" is taken as marking the end of a section of Genesis, the history of Isaac finishes at Gen. 25:19 (*see* P. J. Wiseman, *New Discoveries in Babylonia about Genesis* [1936], pp. 54f). The next paragraphs describe the birth of the twin sons Esau and Jacob, and continue into their stories. Like Abraham, Isaac learned of the faithfulness of God in this matter, for it was not until twenty years after his marriage that his sons were born.

Life in Palestine followed an unchanging pattern for several generations, so that similarity of the events in the life of one person with events in the life of another need not be explained as duplication of tradition. When there was famine in the land the natural reaction of inhabitants of the south was to look to Egypt for food. Abraham and Joseph's brothers went there for corn, and Isaac intended to do so (Gen. 26:2). At this time of distress the covenant promises were reiterated and confirmed to Isaac. Although he was prevented from going to Egypt, he copied his father in telling the men of Gerar that Rebekah was his sister. Although ancient customs (*see* Marriage II.B.2) may make this move understandable and Heb *āḥōt* may have had a wider connotation than "sister," Isaac clearly intended to deceive. 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 (Gen. 26).

The favoritism Isaac showed for Esau and Rebekah showed for Jacob culminated in the deceit by which the younger son received the elder's share and led to his flight to the relatives at Haran. Esau also left his father and settled in Transjordan. About twenty years later Jacob returned with his family and soon thereafter Isaac died. Just as his sons Isaac and Ishmael together buried Abraham, so also Esau and Jacob together laid their father in the family tomb at Hebron (Gen. 35:27–29).

**IV. Biblical References** Although Isaac is often mentioned in the formula "Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob [or Israel]" (so 23 times in the OT, 7 times in the NT), he is otherwise far less prominent than either his father or his son. Jacob calls Yahweh the "Fear" of Isaac (Gen. 31:42), perhaps simply referring to the God whom Isaac revered; possibly it is a name of deeper, unexplained significance. Isaac is called the "gift" of God to Abraham, just as Esau and Jacob are called God's "gifts" to Isaac (Josh. 24:3f; cf. Koran 6:84). Amos uses Isaac in poetic parallel with Israel (Am. 7:9, 16, but the LXX reads Jacob in v 16).

In the NT are noted Isaac's importance as the first to be circumcised on the eighth day (Acts 7:8), his position as first of the elect seed (Rom. 9:7), and his begetting two sons so dissimilar in their relation to the promise as were Esau and Jacob (Rom. 9:13). That Isaac was heir to the promise, a child of old age, and the father of an innumerable progeny are emphasized in He. 11:9–12, where the deeper significance of the sacrifice in Moriah is also discovered (He. 11:17–19; cf. Jas. 2:21); in the same context is noted the faith in God implicit in Isaac's blessing of his sons. Paul uses Isaac and his mother as allegorical representations of Christians, who are justified by faith in the promise of God and who are freeborn heirs of all its spiritual inheritance (Gal. 4:21–31).

**V. Views Other Than Historical** Philo, the chief allegorizer of the scriptural narratives among ancient authors, has little to say of Isaac, whom he calls "the self-instructed nature." More recent critics have taken the view that together with Edom he is a personification of an ethnic group (J. Wellhausen, *Prolegomenon to the History of Israel* [repr 1959], p. 316) or that Isaac was a deity at Beersheba, with the suggestion also that the name of a god might be applied to the intended victim of sacrifice (cf. E. Meyer, *Israeliten und ihre Nachbarstämme* [1906], p. 255). H. Gunkel (*Schriften*

*des AT* [1910], p. 41) allows that the patriarchs were actual persons, but have survived only as names around which cycles of folk stories have crystallized. The position of M. Noth is somewhat similar; he sees Isaac and Abraham as names that were associated with the religion of the southern tribes in Palestine and around which various traditions collected (NHI, pp. 122f). Increasing knowledge of the history of the early centuries of the 2nd millen-

nium b.c. has resulted in the recognition of factual material in the narratives by many historians. J. Bright concludes that, when account is taken of the oral transmission through which they are assumed to have passed, “although the essential historicity of the traditions cannot be impeached, detailed reconstructions are impossible” (BHI, p. 68).

*From the International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*. R. Millard