

OLD TESTAMENT SURVEY

Lesson 7

Isaac and Links in a Chain



Think for a moment about a heavy metal chain – the kind that holds up a heavy load. These are chains that get used to protect people from suspended items that are dangerously heavy.

Which link is the most important?

Arguments might be advanced that one link is more important than others, but those are hard arguments to make. In this sense, people will speak of the “weakest link,” because the failure of any link can cause failure of the entire chain. Each link is important.

We come to this illustration as we discuss what Genesis teaches about Isaac. Isaac is a link in the promise of God to bring a successful resolution to the problems brought about by the sin in the garden.

Repeatedly in the Old Testament, we read about the LORD as “the God of Abraham, the God of *Isaac*, and the God of Jacob” (Ex. 3:15, 4:5). Even in the New Testament, Jesus and others reference the Lord as the God of Abraham, *Isaac* and Jacob (Mt. 22:32; Mk. 12:26; Acts 3:13, 7:32).

Isaac is a link in the chain for the covenant and promises of God. Joseph spoke of the promise of God to bring the Israelites out of Egypt “to the land that he swore to Abraham, to *Isaac*, and to Jacob” (Gen. 50:24). When the Israelites were hurting in Egypt, we read that “God heard their groaning, and God remembered¹ his covenant with Abraham, with *Isaac*, and with Jacob” (Ex. 2:24).

¹ Some are puzzled by the idea that the Old Testament speaks of God “remembering” as if God could forget! We are a bit disadvantaged as we try to read and understand this term. In English, “remember” does generally imply that something has entered one’s mind that had previously been forgotten, but the Hebrew term translated “remember” does not always convey that same idea. The Hebrew word (*zkr*) is used of God meaning more that God “took an action based upon what he knew/remembered.” In other words, it is not emphasizing that something previously

In light of these references, it is surprising that Genesis spends relatively little time on Isaac independent of others in Genesis. We read of Isaac as a passive part of the story of Abraham's obedient willingness to sacrifice him to God. We will also read of Isaac as a role player in the struggle between Jacob and Esau, but we read relatively little that focuses directly on Isaac and his direct interactions with God.

However, this does not diminish the importance of Isaac as a link in the chain.

ISAAC IN THE GENESIS NARRATIVE

Isaac is born in Genesis 21. In Genesis 22, we read of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice him. Isaac does not reappear until chapter 24, and that chapter is really about Abraham sending a servant to find a wife for Isaac. Chapter 25 focuses on Abraham's death and burial, on the offspring of Ishmael, and finally, in the closing verses, on Isaac's wife's barrenness and the ultimate birth of Jacob and Esau. Chapter 26 tells narrative of Isaac, but by chapter 27, Isaac recedes again and the focus starts back onto Jacob and Esau. Early in chapter 28, Isaac disappears in the narrative, resurfacing only for the reference to his death in chapter 35.

Depending on how you consider it, Genesis spends one to two chapters directly on Isaac—very little for his link in the chain when compared to his father (Abraham: Gen. 12-23) and his children (Jacob and Esau: Gen. 25-37 at least). The three generations of men, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, are called the “patriarchs” because they are the biblical ancestors of the Jewish people

Compared to the other patriarchs, there are some interesting things unique to Isaac:

- Isaac was the only patriarch to live his entire life in Canaan, the land promised to Abraham and his descendants. When the time came to get Isaac a wife, Abraham sent his senior servant to his homeland, but left clear instructions Isaac was not to leave Canaan for the trip (Gen. 24:6). Similarly, when a famine threatened Isaac and his family, the LORD appeared to Isaac and told him not to go to Egypt, but to stay put in Canaan (Gen. 26:1-5).
- Isaac was the only patriarch whose name was not changed by God. God changed Abram to Abraham (Gen. 17:5). God changed Jacob to Israel (Gen. 32:28). Jewish tradition taught that this was because God gave Isaac

forgotten reentered God's brain. Rather, it is emphasizing that God was acting because of something historical that was in his mind. See, *Childs, Brevard, Memory and Tradition in Ancient Israel*, (SCM Press 1962).

his original name (Gen 17:19), so there was no need to re-name him.² Isaac's name comes from a verbal form of the Hebrew for "laugh" (*shq*). Abraham laughed when God told him Sarah would have a son, giving the idea that Isaac was named after Abraham's laughing. The name might also convey the meaning, "may (God) laugh" in the sense of "may God look benevolently" upon some person or some matter.³

- Isaac was the first in Scripture to be circumcised eight days after birth as God instructed Abraham (Gen. 17:12, 21:4). The other circumcisions took place on men who were already grown up at the time of God's initial decree.
- Isaac was the only patriarch in Scripture where we are told he did not pick his own wife. Abram appears already married to Sarai, and we are not told how they met (Gen. 11:29). Jacob went in search for his own wife, found Rachel, married her sister Leah, and then finally married Rachel (Gen. 29). With Isaac's marriage, which takes up most of Genesis 24, it is a servant of his father that finds Rebekah and brings her back to Canaan to be Isaac's wife.
- In a related sense, Isaac is also the only patriarch to have just one wife and not keep a concubine. Abraham had Sarah, Hagar, and in his final years Keturah (Gen. 25:1). Jacob had Leah, Rachel, Bilhah and Zilpah (in that order!) (Gen. 29:23f, 28; 30:4, 9). Isaac, on the other hand, had Rebekah and no one else. This is even more significant as we read that for twenty years Rebekah could not have children. Isaac sought God in prayer during that time, no doubt feeling the pressure. God had promised to bring Abraham offspring outnumbering the stars through Isaac, yet as he aged, the offspring could be numbered on one finger—him. The fact that Isaac relied on prayer rather than following his father's use of a surrogate mother exemplifies great faith.
- Isaac was the only patriarch to excel at agriculture rather than simply shepherding. Abraham moved from place to place with his livestock (Gen. 13:2ff). Jacob did much the same (Gen. 30:25ff). Yet Isaac, "sowed in that land" as well as having riches in flocks (Gen. 26:12).

In Genesis, we have "only snippets of Isaac's life,"⁴ and yet, we have a number of passages that point to his uniqueness. Isaac is a link in God's chain that gets the

² See the Jerusalem Talmudic tractate *Berakhot* 1:9, 4a.

³ Skolnik, Fred, ed., *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2d ed., (Thomson Gale 2007) vol. 10 at 33.

⁴ Hoerth, Alfred, *Archaeology and the Old Testament*, (Baker Academic 1998) at 108.

divine blessings and promises, even though he is given much less “press” than his father or children.

At the risk of changing well-worn habits, we insert our first point for home here in the lesson:

POINT FOR HOME 1

“I will establish the oath that I swore to Abraham your father” (Gen. 26:3).

You are in a chain. You may not have a life recorded in the history books, but you are no less unique in how God has made you and how he wants to use you. Take inventory. See the special things about you that God can use—that make you who you are in his kingdom. Know that as links in the chain of his kingdom, there is no one more important or more special than you. Serve him with confidence where he has placed you. You are the one whom he needs and wants.

ISAAC AND REBEKAH

Recently, we had five couples from Vietnam in our home for dinner. Three of the couples had fled South Vietnam at the time it fell. The other two couples were from North Vietnam. The cross-cultural dinner was fascinating. One highlight for me was asking each couple how they met their respective spouses.

The answers were fascinating and almost typical: school, through friends, work, and for one couple—at a bar!

When we go back into the times of early biblical history, we find three stories of couples getting their spouses from the local watering hole! It was not, however, even remotely a 21st century bar! The local watering hole in the second millennium BC was the local water well!

It was at a water well that Moses found his wife (Ex. 2:15-21); Jacob finds Rachel at a water well (Gen. 29:1-14); and Abraham’s servant finds Isaac’s wife Rebekah at a water well (Gen. 24:10-28). Found in Genesis 24, the story of Rebekah takes up almost half of the biblical narrative about Isaac, and it is well worth a closer examination.

Genesis 24 begins noting that Abraham “was old, well advanced in years. And the LORD had blessed Abraham in all things” (Gen. 24:1). Abraham had been promised great blessings—innumerable offspring, an inherited land, fathering of nations, and his own role as a link in God’s chain connecting restoration to his people fallen from paradise. Abraham did not yet live in the full fruit of those

blessings. They contained promises to occur in the future.⁵ Abraham worked to be sure that his child Isaac walked in that promise, sending his oldest and most trustworthy servant to find Isaac a wife from Abraham's own people back in Mesopotamia.

The servant takes ten camels and good gifts and goes on a journey of about one month⁶ to find a wife among Abraham's relatives. Here, we see a culture unlike that found in Western civilization, at least since the romantic notions of Shakespeare. As Hoerth notes:

Although such matchmaking is unusual in the United States, it is still normal practice in some other parts of the world. Such cultures teach that loving whom you marry, rather than the reverse, results in a stronger relationship.⁷

Once the servant arrives in Mesopotamia in or near the city of Nahor, he prays to the Lord for help and a sign. This is the first we know of the man invoking Yahweh God.

And he said, "O LORD, God of my master Abraham, please grant me success today and show steadfast love to my master Abraham. Behold, I am standing by the spring of water, and the daughters of the men of the city are coming out to draw water. Let the young woman to whom I shall say, 'Please let down your jar that I may drink,' and who shall say, 'Drink, and I will water your camels'—let her be the one whom you have appointed for your servant Isaac. By this I shall know that you have shown steadfast love to my master." (Gen. 24:12-14).

This prayer was clearly in alignment with God's will, for *before* he even finished praying, Rebekah (daughter to Abraham's nephew Bethuel) came out to the well. We are told that Rebekah was "very attractive in appearance," and by all accounts, she was as pretty on the inside as she was on the outside. For when Abraham's servant asked for a drink, Rebekah offered not only water for him, but she volunteered to water his camels also.

⁵ "Abraham's life is lived out between the promise of divine blessing and the actualization of that promise." (Hamilton, Victor, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18-50*, (Eerdmans 1995) at 138). In that sense, Abraham is an example for the believer in Christ who lives in "the now and the not yet." There is a promise of coming perfection spent in eternity with God, and while that eternity has begun, it is not yet complete.

⁶ Hoerth at 108.

⁷ *Ibid.*

After watching to measure whether this was the LORD's blessing of his journey and answer to his prayers, the servant saw it was. He then produced gifts of a gold ring (for her nose!) and two bracelets. Abraham's servant inquired of her identity and asked whether there might be room at her house for the night.⁸ The daughter gives her identity and offers not only room for the night but food for the camels as well. At this point, we have the servant's second invocation of Yahweh.

The man bowed his head and worshiped the LORD and said, "Blessed be the LORD, the God of my master Abraham, who has not forsaken his steadfast love and his faithfulness toward my master. As for me, the LORD has led me in the way to the house of my master's kinsmen." (Gen. 24:26-27).

We note that in the first invocation, the man simply prays. This second time, the servant bows his head and worships the LORD.

Rebekah runs home and gives a report of what happened. Rebekah's brother (Laban) then enters the scene, running out to Abraham's servant and getting involved. Laban finds the servant still at the well and tells him,

Come in, O blessed of the LORD. Why do you stand outside? For I have prepared the house and a place for the camels (Gen. 24:31).

Laban brings the servant to the house and urges him to eat. The faithful servant refuses to eat before speaking his piece and dealing with the matter of his charge. Abraham's servant recounts how God had dealt favorably with Abraham and how Abraham had charged the servant to find a wife from among his father's house. The servant then tells of the prayer and events at the well.

Laban, Rebekah's brother, and Bethuel, Rebekah's father saw the hand of the LORD at work:

Then Laban and Bethuel answered and said, "The thing has come from the LORD; we cannot speak to you bad or good. Behold, Rebekah is before you; take her and go, and let her be the wife of your master's son, as the LORD has spoken." (Gen. 24:50-51).

Hearing this, we read of a third time that the servant responds to Yahweh:

When Abraham's servant heard their words, he bowed himself to the earth before the LORD (Gen. 24:52).

⁸ We should note this was before motels and inns. Most historians note the inception of inns with the peace and travel afforded by the Roman Empire. Before that, travelers managed with their own tents or in the homes of others.

The physical progression of the servant before Yahweh is now complete, and it shows the progression of the heart. First, the servant simply prays. Once the prayer was answered, the next time the servant bows his head in worship. The third time, the servant falls prostrate to the ground before the LORD in worship.

Following these events, Rebekah decides to leave with the servant the very next day to come to Isaac. The caravan returns to Canaan on a day when Isaac is out in a field in the evening hours. Rebekah puts on her veil and the two get married. The text makes a point of expressing the love Isaac had for Rebekah and of the comfort she brought him.

POINT FOR HOME 2

“O LORD, behold I am standing... The man bowed his head... he bowed himself to the earth before the Lord.” (Gen. 24:12-13, 26, 52).

The more the servant understood God’s mighty hand and involvement in his life, the greater the man’s worship and appreciation for the LORD. This is no less true for us than for him. The more time we spend in God’s presence, the more carefully and diligently we seek to live his will, the closer we will draw in understanding of his grandeur and might. Holiness breeds holiness. Time in God’s presence leaves one wiser and more reverent. The obverse is also true. Time walking away from God and his will results in shaken faith, ignorance of God’s work, and arrogance of our own ways and ideas.

Let us make a conscious decision to pursue holiness and intimacy with the LORD.

ISAAC AND GOD’S PROMISE

In Genesis chapter 26, we read about the LORD’s direct interactions with Isaac related to the promise previously given Abraham. The chapter begins by noting that another famine hit Canaan much like the famine that had driven Abraham to Egypt. Isaac is in Gerar where Abimelech⁹ is king. Isaac’s initial thought seems to be following his father’s example and going to Egypt. Here, the word of the LORD came to him in instruction as well as promise:

And the LORD appeared to him and said, "Do not go down to Egypt; dwell in the land of which I shall tell you. Sojourn in this land, and I

⁹ Abimelech was king of Gerar some 50 years earlier when Abraham executed a covenant with him noted in Genesis 21:22ff. It is not a fair assumption that the king is the same one. The name “Abimelech” means, “My father is king” and could easily have been a title or name associated with multiple princes who rose to the throne. Gen. 26:26 does, however, still have “Phicol” as the commander of the king’s army.

will be with you and will bless you, for to you and to your offspring I will give all these lands, and I will establish the oath that I swore to Abraham your father. I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and will give to your offspring all these lands. And in your offspring all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws" (Gen. 26:2-5).

Isaac does a commendable job following the LORD's instructions, but in Gerar, Isaac shows his moral failure. Men in Gerar were quite attracted to Rebekah (we can deduce from the ages and facts surrounding their marriage in chapter 24 that Rebekah was several decades younger than Isaac). Isaac fears that Rebekah might be taken by force, and so he resorts to the old family lie!

When the men of the place asked him about his wife, he said, "She is my sister," for he feared to say, "My wife," thinking, "lest the men of the place should kill me because of Rebekah," because she was attractive in appearance (Gen. 26:7).

The king soon figured out Isaac's lie and confronted him. Abimelech laid down the law that no one should be touching Rebekah and Isaac planted in that area that year. The LORD blessed his crops and Isaac grew even richer, much to the envy of the pagans around him.

Isaac left the town and dug again the wells of his father in a nearby valley (one of the wells Isaac dug became the town of Beersheba.). The wells caused discord with herdsmen of Gerar, prompting Abimelech to enter into a treaty with Isaac. The text indicates that Abimelech could tell by Isaac's life that the Lord was blessing him:

Isaac said to them, "Why have you come to me, seeing that you hate me and have sent me away from you?" They said, "We see plainly that the LORD has been with you. So we said, let there be a sworn pact between us, between you and us, and let us make a covenant with you, that you will do us no harm, just as we have not touched you and have done to you nothing but good and have sent you away in peace. You are now the blessed of the LORD." (Gen. 26:27-29).

While the text gives us this limited accounting of Isaac's life, it quickly merges into a contrast with that of his son Esau, who takes a local woman as his wife making life "bitter" for Isaac and Rebekah. The next chapter moves the focus more squarely onto the twins, Esau and Jacob.

The early church saw in Isaac clear echoes and prophetic representations of Christ. The similarity of Isaac and the willingness of Abraham to sacrifice him was a

comparison set out in an earlier lesson. It is not the only point of similarity, however. Consider:

- Both Isaac and Christ were promised births (Gen. 17:19; Lk 1:31).
- Both Isaac and Christ were born by a miracle. Isaac to Sarah at an age where “the way of women had ceased to be with Sarah” (Gen. 18:11). Jesus was born to Mary while she was still a virgin (Lk. 1:34).
- Both Isaac and Christ were “only begotten” sons. Christ calls himself that in the well known passage Jn. 3:16 where John uses the Greek *monogene* as “only begotten.” This same word is used by the write of Hebrews calling Isaac the “only” son of Abraham in Heb. 11:17.
- Both Isaac and Christ carried the wood for their sacrificial deaths (although the sacrifice of Isaac was stopped). (Gen. 22:6; Jn. 19:17).
- Both Isaac and Christ are following a divine order for death and, in doing so, over come death. Isaac overcomes death by God substituting another sacrifice. Jesus overcomes death through resurrection.
- Both Isaac and Christ have a “bride” selected for them by their Father. Isaac married Rebekah who was brought by Abraham’s servant. The church is represented as the bride of Christ in Rev. 19:6-10. Moreover the early church pointed out that after the promised marriage, Rebekah had a long journey and wait before the consummation. In the same way, the church has a wait before the end of days consummates the marriage to Christ the groom.

POINT FOR HOME 3

“I will be with you and bless you” (Gen. 26:3).

God puts his promise on Isaac. God does so as Isaac is in the process of obeying and trusting God in matters of daily direction (“live here, not there”). However, the promise is not linked to Isaac’s own goodness or obedience. God places his promise and links it to the previous promise God had made to Abraham, “I will...because Abraham obeyed my voice” (Gen. 26:5).

Paul uses Isaac as an allegorical example for the church explaining that Christians “like Isaac, are children of promise” (Gal. 4:28). As a child born of a promise and who inherited through promise, Isaac represents the spiritual inheritance of the Christian believer.

God’s blessing is a fulfillment of his own promises, not based on works, lest any man should boast, but based on God’s faithfulness, which is ultimately shown in

the finished work of Christ. As children of promise, there is the opportunity and responsibility to live up to the promise. That is different than working to earn the promise! It was true for Isaac, and it is no less true today.

WANT MORE?

Take time to read Genesis 25-35. Refresh yourself in the coming story of sibling rivalry, ingratitude, sneakiness, and family dysfunction. Email me and let me know your thoughts and analysis! Email is: wantmore@biblical-literacy.com.