



Issac

Heir of the Covenant

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Isaac (Hebrew, “laughter”), Biblical patriarch, the son of Abraham, half brother of Ishmael, and father of Jacob and Esau. The birth of Isaac was promised (Genesis 17:19, 21) to Abraham and his wife Sarah, after a long and childless marriage, as a sign that the blessings originally bestowed by God upon Abraham would be continued in Isaac, heir of the Covenant. The events of Isaac’s life are recounted in the Holy Book of Genesis 21-28.

The dominant story in the narrative, and one of the most widely known stories in the Holy Bible, is that of the sacrifice of Isaac (Genesis 22). According to this account, God tested Abraham’s faith by asking him to sacrifice his beloved son. At the last moment, after God was convinced of the perfect obedience of both father and son, he accepted a ram as a substitute for the youth. This story is thought to express the Hebrew rejection of human sacrifice, practiced by surrounding nations. The ram is recalled today in synagogue ritual at the solemn blowing of the shofar, or ram’s horn, during the Jewish High Holy Days, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

The New Testament alludes to Isaac as a precursor of the Lord Jesus Christ and of the church (Galatians 3:16, 4:21-31), and the obedience to his father to the extent of self-sacrifice is associated with that of the Lord Jesus Christ (see Hebrews 11:17-19). These themes were developed by several of the patristic writers, and Isaac appears often in Christian art,



The sacrifice of Issac

particularly in association with the Holy Eucharist.

According to Islamic tradition, Abraham’s older son, Ishmael, was the intended sacrificial victim and Abraham’s rightful heir. Muslims trace their lineage back to Ishmael, whose mother, Hagar, was the Egyptian handmaid to Abraham’s wife.

Archaeologists and Biblical scholars have drawn parallels between the Biblical narrative of Isaac and the history of the Semitic tribes. Abraham is thought to represent the nomadic stock out of which the Hebrew and Edomite tribes separated. Isaac is believed to represent the tribes that joined to form the Hebrew confederacy and to give allegiance to the God, Yahweh, or Jehovah, originally a tribal deity; and Ishmael is believed to represent the tribes of

Edom. Isaac was a relatively minor figure compared to the other two great Biblical patriarchs, Abraham, his father, and Jacob, his son; but a number of the details of the Biblical account are believed by scholars to have major symbolic importance. The story of his birth is believed to be a deliberate attempt by early Hebrew writers to alter the traditions of the Semitic tribes in order to strengthen adherence to the Hebrew confederacy, a military and political alliance, by suggesting that it had divine inspiration. In making Isaac the legitimate son, and Ishmael the illegitimate son, of their common ancestor, the Hebrews claimed superiority over the independent Edomite tribes. Finally, the rivalry between Isaac’s two sons is thought to reflect again the rivalry between Edom and the Hebrews.