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Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"On his deathbed, the patriarch Isaac received the important men from the city to talk to him. Among these men was an unnamed priest of God who requested Isaac to tell him a word (*T. Isaac* 4.8). In this moment, the *Testament of Isaac*¹¹ depicts Isaac as a priestly authority who is able to instruct priests. If you have not read ancient narratives in which Isaac plays a role, but have only read Genesis, you might be confused: Why does it represent Isaac in this manner? Was Isaac a priest? Nonetheless, the *Testament of Isaac* does not make up this representation of Isaac from out of nothing. In what follows, I sketch out relevant events from Isaac's narrative tradition to show that there was a tradition of Isaac as a priest that makes this representation not unexpected.¹²



John W. Fadden

When Isaac Was a Priest*

On his deathbed, the patriarch Isaac received the important men from the city to talk to him. Among these men was an unnamed priest of God who requested Isaac to tell him a word (*T. Isaac* 4.8). In this moment, the *Testament of Isaac*¹¹ depicts Isaac as a priestly authority who is able to instruct priests. If you have not read ancient narratives in which Isaac plays a role, but have only read Genesis, you might be confused: Why does it represent Isaac in this manner? Was Isaac a priest? Nonetheless, the *Testament of Isaac* does not make up this representation of Isaac from out of nothing. In what follows, I sketch out relevant events from Isaac's narrative tradition to show that there was a tradition of Isaac as a priest that makes this representation not unexpected.¹²

James VanderKam and James Kugel demonstrate that Second Temple interpreters base their understanding of Isaac as a priest in Genesis.¹³ In Genesis 26:23-25, Ha-Shem (the Divine Name) appeared to Isaac at Beer-Sheba. In response to the appearance, Isaac "built an altar there, called on the name of Ha-Shem" (Gen. 26:25a) and pitched

* The following essay is a popular version of part of the materials discussed in the first chapter of my dissertation, J.W. Fadden, "*Our Father Isaac: Reading the Sahidic Testament of Isaac in an Egyptian Monastic Context*" (University of Denver and Iliff School of Theology: Denver, 2013). As such I have attempted to minimize the footnotes and scholarly discussions that might distract the popular reader.

¹¹ The *Testament of Isaac* survives as an Egyptian Christian text perhaps from the fourth or fifth century C.E. The work contains an account of Isaac's death and his tour of the heavens. The work appears to have an Egyptian Christian monastic community in mind as can be seen in the representation of Isaac in the narrative.

¹² Mieke Bal discusses characters conforming to the expectations of a narratives intended audience. In short, writers tend to treat characters that are well known in a way that would not confuse the reader, unless the change in character trait is supposed to affect the reader, or reflects the collective identity of the textual community who read the work. Even though Bal is writing at the turn of the twentieth/ twenty-first century, her observation seems useful for our purposes. I have found her observation to be the case, in general, for many of the ancient writings about the biblical patriarchs. M. Bal *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 120.

¹³ J.C. VanderKam, "Jubilees' Exegetical Creation of Levi the Priest," in *From Revelation to Canon* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 545-61. J.Kugel, "Levi's Elevation to the Priesthood in Second Temple Writings." *HTR* 86.1 (1993): 1-64.

his tent there. *Jubilees*¹⁴ makes explicit that Isaac performed a sacrifice, in its retelling of the account: Isaac “built an altar there where Abraham, his father, had built at first and called upon the name of the lord and *he offered a sacrifice to the God of Abraham, his father*” (Jub. 24.23). Some Second Temple period interpreters, like those responsible for *Jubilees*, seem to understand the acts of building an altar and of calling on the name of Ha-Shem to be acts that only a priest of Ha-Shem was permitted to do. For such an interpreter, Genesis 26:25 contains the exegetical warrant to characterize Isaac as a priest.

While Genesis does not make an explicit claim that Isaac becomes a priest, *Jubilees* reports such an event. *Jubilees* attempts to resolve a perceived problem in that Israel’s ancestors make sacrifices before Moses receives the Torah at Mt. Sinai and, thus, God has not yet revealed the priestly instructions for sacrifice to the Israelites. *Jubilees* relies on a chain-of-priests motif helps solve the problem. In a chain-of-priests motif, the elder priest passes down the priesthood to the priest of the next generation. God instructed Adam, the first priest, who passes it down to his son, the next priest, who passes it down to his son until Noah. The chain then skips generations until Abraham takes possession of the books of Noah with the priestly instructions in them. During Abraham’s last days, he passes on the sacerdotal wisdom to Isaac, explaining to Isaac how to properly perform sacrifices, consumption of the priestly portion, wood for the fire of the altar, concern over the treatment of blood, and the danger of impurity (*Jub.* 21.1-26). At this point, Isaac takes over the duties as the priest for his generation.

In the next story (*Jub.* 22.1-7), *Jubilees* has Isaac assume his duties as a priest. Abraham’s family comes together, including Isaac’s older brother Ishmael, and Isaac performs the sacrifice at the Festival of Weeks, slaughtering the sacrifice and offering it up on Abraham’s altar at Hebron. Isaac also makes a peace offering during this story. Through his actions, Isaac confirms his status as the new priest.

Few sources survive from antiquity that mention Isaac’s activities during much of the time between Abraham’s death and Isaac’s old age. This lack of Isaac sources is not surprising when we consider how little

¹⁴ A mid-second century B.C.E. work, *Jubilees* offers an alternative account of the narratives found in Genesis and Exodus. It was popular among some Second Temple Jews, with parts of it found among the Dead Sea Scrolls. Its attention to ritual may suggest that its early textual community was in some sense ‘priestly’. Later, *Jubilees* became popular among early Christians and survives as part of the Ethiopic canon of scripture.

Genesis narrates Isaac's life events for that period (only Gen. 26). Turning to when Isaac becomes aged, individual sources suggest that Isaac has priestly duties. Josephus¹⁵ reports:

But when he [Isaac] was old and could not see at all, he called Esau to him, and told him, that besides his blindness and the disorder of his eyes, his very old age hindered him from his worship of God by sacrifice. (*Ant.* 1.27)

In Josephus' account of the biblical story of Jacob's blessing (see Gen. 27), Isaac tells Esau that he cannot perform the divine service the patriarchal priest needs to do before blessing his son. The detail about ministering to God is not found in Genesis, which suggests Josephus or his source knows of a tradition in which Isaac was a priest. Since the dominant ideology among Second Temple Jews is that only a priest performs the divine service, an ancient reader of Josephus likely would understand Isaac to be performing the role of a priest.

Even though Isaac blesses Jacob, neither Josephus nor *Jubilees* have Jacob (nor Esau) receive the priestly blessing from Isaac at this time.¹⁶ Given Josephus' tendency to follow Genesis's account, it is not surprising that he does not mention a priestly blessing, since Isaac does not offer one in Genesis. *Jubilees*, however, relies on the chain-of-priests motif, so a reader might be surprised that Jacob does not receive the priestly blessing making him the priest for his generation. But, as James Kugel has argued, for *Jubilees*, Jacob is not a priest.¹⁷

While most accounts of the patriarchs focus on what happens with Jacob after he receives the blessing from Isaac, the *Testament of Isaac* offers a flashback about what Isaac does for the century when he is blind.

But our father Isaac made a bedroom for himself in his house when the light of his eyes became heavy, he retired into it until the end of one hundred years. He fasted until evening daily. He offered up on behalf of himself and his household a young animal for their soul. And he spent half of the night praying and blessing God. And he lived an ascetic life for one hundred years. And he kept fasts which were drawn out over three forty day periods each year neither drinking wine nor eating fruit nor sleeping upon a bed and he gave thanks to God and he prayed. (*T. Isaac* 4.1-5)

¹⁵ Flavius Josephus was a first century C.E. Jew who, after being captured by the Romans during the Jewish Revolt, benefitted from the Flavian dynasty's patronage.

¹⁶ It should be noted that in some traditions, Esau's garments, the ones that Jacob wears to deceive his father, are thought to be the priestly garments that have been passed down through the generations. However, those traditions do not address how Esau received the garments (presumably from Isaac).

¹⁷ Kugel, "Levi's Elevation." See also, VanderKam, "*Jubilees*' Exegetical Creation."

In short, Isaac retreats into his room and performs ascetical practices and offers sacrifices for his family. Thus, during this relatively unaccounted for period of Isaac's story, at least *Testament of Isaac* remembers Isaac as performing the duties of the patriarchal priest, offering up a young animal for the soul of himself and his household (*T. Isaac* 4.2).

M.R. James points out Isaac's performance of sacrifices for his family parallels Job's sacrifices in Job 1:5.¹⁸ Both characters are offering sacrifices for the benefit of their households. As is often the case, however, the differences are more interesting than the observed parallel. The two stories are different in that Isaac's priestly sacrifices are intertwined with his ascetic practices, likely due to the Egyptian Christian monastic context of *Testament of Isaac*. Furthermore, the *Testament of Isaac*'s Isaac does this for one hundred years – the tradition related to Job does not count the duration. Why does Isaac do this for one hundred years? The duration takes into account the time that Jacob is away, and it helps to move the narrative closer to Isaac's deathbed. In this flashback, *Testament of Isaac* evidences something we already noticed: after Isaac blesses Jacob and Jacob departs, Isaac remains the priest. For the duration of Jacob's sojourn, Isaac continues to perform his priestly role.

In *Jubilees*, *Aramaic Levi Document*,¹⁹ and the *Testament of Levi*,²⁰ Isaac passes down the priesthood to his grandson Levi prior to Jacob giving his tithe at Bethel.²¹ The story of Isaac blessing Levi as priest is a secondary storyline in *Jubilees*. The main story is how Jacob repays a tithe that he promised to his God at Bethel when there is not a priest at Bethel to accept his tithe – since a tithe can only be repaid to a priest of God.²² Since Isaac is a priest, Jacob sends for his father, who refuses to come and tells Jacob to visit (*Jub.* 31.3-4). Jacob brings his sons Judah and Levi on his visit. Isaac receives a gift of prophecy and blesses Levi, ordaining his priesthood (*Jub.* 31.12-17). Blessing Levi, Isaac says,

¹⁸ M.R. James, *Testament of Abraham* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1892), 157.

¹⁹ *Aramaic Levi Document* is a late-third or early second century B.C.E. text that narrates the story of the patriarch Levi from Levi's perspective.

²⁰ *Testament of Levi* is a turn of the eras deathbed account for Levi, It circulates as a part of the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, a work popular with early Christians.

²¹ While some ancient sources treat Jacob as a priestly figure who performs sacrifices, and some priestly genealogy lists Jacob after Isaac, none of the surviving stories have narratives in which Isaac passes the priesthood down to his son.

²² The death of Rebekkah's nurse in Genesis gives the exegetical warrant for an unmentioned trip to see Isaac. See Kugel, "Levi's Elevation" and VanderKam's "*Jubilees*' Exegetical Creation."

“May the LORD give you and your seed very great honor. May he draw you and your seed near to him from all flesh to serve in his sanctuary as the angels of the presence and the holy ones.” (*Jub.* 31:14)

Through the blessing, Isaac appoints Levi and his descendants as a priesthood. When Jacob tells his father about his tithe, Isaac tells him he is too old to travel to Bethel and sends Jacob back to Bethel (*Jub.* 31.24-30) with the new priest, Levi, who accepts the tithe (*Jub.* 32.1-9). In *Jubilees*, the story focuses on Jacob. However, in solving the problem of Jacob’s tithe, Isaac blesses and ordains his grandson as the next priest.

Aramaic Levi likewise points to Isaac bestowing the priesthood on Levi. This account, however, is told from Levi’s perspective and the narrative emphasizes how Levi became a priest, while Jacob’s tithe is secondary. Prior to Isaac blessing Levi, Levi has a vision in the heavens where seven men in white robes made Levi a priest (*Aramaic Levi* 4). When Levi says, “And we went up to my father Isaac and he also blessed me thus,” (*Aramaic Levi* 5.1), Isaac becomes the earthly counterpart to them. As outgoing priest, Isaac blesses the new priest Levi. Unlike *Jubilees*, *Aramaic Levi* does not report the words that Isaac spoke in the blessing.

Testament of Levi mentions that Isaac blessed Levi before he went to Bethel and was Jacob’s priest there (*T. Levi* 9.1-3)²³ Levi narrates the account: “And my father’s father blessed me in accord with the vision I had seen” (*T. Levi* 9.2). The words of Isaac’s priestly blessing are not recorded. Yet, the implication is that Isaac’s blessing bestows the priesthood upon his grandson. Not only does the vision that Levi sees relate to the priesthood, but also Jacob gives his tithe to Levi at Bethel following the blessing.

Besides Isaac giving Levi the priestly blessing, as the elder priest Isaac would ensure that Levi acquired the correct priestly wisdom. We find reports of such training in *Aramaic Levi* and in *Testament of Levi*.²⁴ After Jacob and his family come to live with Isaac, Isaac teaches Levi the sacerdotal wisdom. In *Aramaic Levi*, Isaac covers a wealth of topics related to purity and the holiness of the priestly line (*Aramaic Levi* 6), the wood to use on the altar (*Aramaic Levi* 7), sacrifices (*Aramaic Levi* 8), priestly measures (*Aramaic Levi* 9), and final commands and a

²³ This account is a summary of the one reported in *Jubilees*. *Testament of Levi* also reports Levi’s vision, similar to *Aramaic Levi*’s account prior to the blessing (*T. Levi* 8).

²⁴ A fragmentary work from the Dead Sea Scrolls, *Testament of Qahat* suggests that the priestly knowledge is passed down from one generation to the next through books.

blessing for the priesthood (*Aramaic Levi*10).²⁵ In *Testament of Levi* 9, the content of Isaac's wisdom is truncated. Nonetheless, it covers sacrifice and moral behavior, specifically the dangers of fornication (intermarriage) and its polluting effect. Both of these accounts do not explicitly mention Isaac is on his deathbed. Since Isaac is a secondary character, his story matters in as much as it coincides with Levi's. Once Levi is trained, there is no need to discuss Isaac any further.

As mentioned in the opening paragraph of this essay, *Testament of Isaac* has a priest of God ask Isaac for a word on Isaac's deathbed. This episode is a retelling of the event where Isaac passes down sacerdotal wisdom to Levi in the later *Testament of Isaac*. In this account, Levi is not named: he is replaced with an unnamed priest of God. Likewise, *Testament of Isaac* does not explicitly connect Isaac's sacerdotal wisdom to what Abraham instructed Isaac. Isaac is the lone priestly authority who has a voice in *Testament of Isaac*.

In response to the priest's request, Isaac goes into a long speech with sacerdotal wisdom. Isaac is concerned with the sacrifice not having a blemish, ritual bathing, and the priest's disposition before the altar.

Do not offer up anything in sacrifice with a blemish in it. Bathe in water before you approach the altar. Do not mix thoughts of this world with thoughts of God when you are standing before him.

Do what is in your power to be at peace with everyone for when you approach him and offer your sacrifice, when you come to offer it upon the altar, you will give one hundred prayers to your God by yourself. (*T. Isaac* 4.11-13)

Isaac also teaches the priest a prayer to recite as he approaches the altar which asks for God's forgiveness and requests that the sacrifice be acceptable (*T. Isaac* 4.14-19). The last verse of the prayer is noteworthy:

O God, the one who was with our father Adam and Abel and Noah and our fathers Abraham and Isaac, his son, the one who was with Jacob, be with me, and take my sacrifice from my hand. (*T. Isaac* 4.19)

This verse is reminiscent of the chain-of-priests motif that *Jubilees* used, with the notable inclusion of Jacob. If the 'me' is referring to the priest who requests a word, then the next person in such a chain ought to be Levi.

²⁵ Even though *Jubilees* does not report Isaac's teaching of the priestly wisdom to Levi (perhaps, the absence of this event is not surprising since *Jubilees*'s focus is on the story of Jacob), the contents of *Aramaic Levi*'s instructions are similar to the instructions that Abraham gave to Isaac in *Jubilees* 21. R.A. Kugler, *From Patriarch to Priest*, (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996), 167.

Isaac offers additional sacerdotal wisdom for priest or monk to live the life of holy retreat as they are to participate in the divine service of the angels for God (*T. Isaac* 4.23-25). Elsewhere, the priestly wisdom covers sacrifice and ethics. But *Testament of Isaac* links the priest's way of life with the monastic way of life. The content is somewhat different from *Aramaic Levi* and *Testament of Levi*, but this is not surprising given the distance between the earlier works and *Testament of Isaac*. *Testament of Isaac*'s Isaac speaks wisdom for its monastic audience.

In this essay, I shared relevant pieces of Isaac's narrative life found in a few ancient texts that attest to a remembered tradition of Isaac as a priestly figure. Genesis 26 provides the opportunity for ancient interpreters to characterize Isaac as a priest. Although Isaac is often a secondary character, he is the priest for his generation, linking earlier priesthoods to Levi's priesthood – especially in *Aramaic Levi*, *Jubilees*, and *Testament of Levi*. The characterization of Isaac as a priest in *Testament of Isaac* is familiar to these representations of Isaac, especially when he passes down the sacerdotal wisdom to the priest of God. The ancient readers of *Testament of Isaac* would not be surprised with this Isaac.

Although my modest goal in this essay was to show the surviving tradition of Isaac's narrative life where he is characterized as a priest, I will end with a few thoughts about why Isaac appears as a priest in *Testament of Isaac*. As a fourth or fifth century C.E. text, the Sahidic *Testament of Isaac* was preserved and used by Egyptian Christian monks. The monks would find within the work traditions about Isaac that is relevant to their ascetic lives. The work recalls traditions that would have allowed the monks to remember their ancestral past in a manner that gave meaning to their present lives. The work relies on previous traditions, although the work is able to shape the memory of the tradition in such a way as to make it relevant for the present. As I sketch out the surviving tradition, the *Testament of Isaac* reconfigures the memory of Isaac as a priest by transforming him into an ascetic priest. He lives an ascetic life while also performing his priestly duties. Isaac connects living the monastic life and the priestly life as participation in the same heavenly service. Such a shift makes his priesthood relevant for the early Egyptian Christian monks. The monks in fourth and fifth century C.E. Egypt are enmeshed in a context where the emerging orthodox ecclesiastical hierarchy seeks to bring the monasteries under ecclesiastical control. A figure like the ascetic priest Isaac helps them to mediate issues of power, practice, and holiness that arise between priests and monastics.

The monks could look to the memory of Isaac to support their ascetic way of life. This memory of Isaac also calls the priests to adopt Isaac's ascetic way of life. Finally, by turning to Isaac, the monks have an alternative access to holiness outside of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. The memory of Isaac as a priest would be relevant for the Egyptian monastics in such a context.



Caravaggio
(The Sacrifice of Isaac)