

**Isaac in the Old Testament:
a new interpretation from Genesis 22,
based on hermeneutical-methodological
and exegetical investigations**

by

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It would probably not be worth the trouble of making books if they failed to teach the author something he hadn't known before, if they didn't lead to unforeseen places, if they didn't disperse one toward a strange new relation with himself. The pain and the pleasure of the book is to be an experience.

– M Foucault

[in Rabinow, P (ed.) 1984. *The Foucault Reader*. New York: Pantheon, 339]

ABSTRACT

Isaac, the least of the patriarchs in the texts of the Old Testament and in the eyes of its readers, offers a surprising number of possibilities for new avenues of interpretation of the Pentateuch and related texts. These are arrived at in this study by first tracing a number of historical-developmental trajectories relevant to the author, namely from philosophy of science, through the main points from the history of Pentateuch studies in South Africa, via an argued choice for historical exegesis over against a-historical methods, and by means of a brief overview of the major insights that had shaped the scholarly study of the Old Testament patriarchs. The central part of the study is exegetical, with the main focus on Genesis 22, which has proven to be a key text. An overview of the historical issues related to this text is offered. Illustrating the limitations of a-historical exegesis, a narrative reading of Genesis 22 is undertaken, followed by a new historical interpretation of the same text, which draws on all of the foregoing. In the light of this new Genesis 22 interpretation, the other Isaac texts in the Old Testament are reviewed, as they would have been understood in post-exilic inner-Judean identity politics, namely between the traditions of the patriarchal traditions. Drawing throughout on an anecdotal view of Old Testament historiography, a theory proposed on the multiplex or composite nature of the personages of the patriarchs, though of Isaac in particular, and on the idea of the post-exilic inner-Judean identity politics, a creative, critical, historical retelling in almost narrative mode is offered of the history of Isaac in the Old Testament as a conclusion to the study.



Keywords and phrases

- Isaac
- Genesis 22
- Pentateuch
- Exegetical method
- Pentateuch interpretation in South Africa
- The patriarchs
- The spelling of Isaac's name
- Identity politics
- Textual reinterpretation
- Dating of Old Testament texts

PREFACE

How this dissertation came into being

As the research on my chosen theme here progressed, I followed the methodology of testing my findings and insights by means of papers read at research conferences and seminars, and publishing articles and chapters in academic volumes. This means that many of my insights here have grown over time, and have already been through some system of peer evaluation in the to-and-fro of hermeneutical and exegetical debate. Though all the persons involved in a more informal way in such processes, by means of discussions and comments, cannot be named here, I can list the gatherings and publications involved as a means of acknowledging these influences on my studies:

- Conferences and seminars: Pro Pent (Project for the Study of the Pentateuch) pre-seminar, January 2007, Pretoria, and Pro Pent seminars: August 2006, Bass Lake Country Lodge, August 2005, Hammanskraal, and July 2004, Munich; IOSOT (International Organization for the Study of the Old Testament) congress, July 2007, Ljubljana; SBL (Society for Biblical Literature) congress, Vienna, July 2007; OTSSA (Old Testament Society of South Africa) congress, Pretoria, September 1997;
- Publications involved: *Journal for Semitics / Tyskrif vir Semitistiek*, 2008 & 2006; *HTS Theological Studies*, 2008; Le Roux, J & Otto, E (eds) 2007. *The Pentateuch between synchrony and diachrony*. New York: T & T Clark; *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, 2007; Otto, E & le Roux, J (eds). 2005. *A critical study of the Pentateuch. An encounter between Europe and Africa*

(Altes Testament und Moderne, Band 20). Münster: LIT Verlag; *Old Testament Essays*, 2004 & 1998.

How this dissertation should be read

Above all, when undertaking this study, I had wanted to be new: to say something different; to make a thoroughly creative contribution to the field of Old Testament scholarship. In order to do so, the initial, avowed intention with this study was that it should therefore not be cast in the South African mould, namely of intense methodological awareness and debate. Rather, I had wanted it to be a dissertation in the German tradition, where everything relevant and more is said in intensely referenced text, with excurses and finely nuanced debate in the footnotes, to cover all angles. However, that did not render the novel insights I above all longed for. The dissertation was then reconceptualised as one in the British tradition, in which much is assumed on the part of readers: everything is not said, but much is implied, in such a way that only the informed, specialist reader one would expect with a monograph would grasp the finely-aimed allusions, but with the writing style more elegant, more prosaic. Here too, however, an original insight into my subject matter was not forthcoming; another rewriting was required. Reinvestigating my own academic roots, which meant placing my intellectual identity in explicit discourse with the primary and secondary texts on Isaac, somehow, though, *did* render that “aha”-moment (as meant by Bühler 1907:14); in fact, more than one, and these have been taken up in this study. This is, after all, then, a thoroughly South African study: it was the methodological heritage of South African Old Testament scholarship that had unexpectedly provided the shafts of insight I had hoped for.

Readers with an eye for *Kompositionsgeschichte* will thus be able still to detect all three these ways of writing a dissertation in this, the end product: the at times energetic source referencing (though now *sans* the detailed footnote debates, for the most part edited out); the at times finer nuances (though now often with the references again inserted); the ever-present methodological self-awareness. As was the case with the Pentateuch editors, however, these “uneven edges” are deliberately left in here, by authorial decision, as an acknowledgement of the ways by which I have come to this station, and as an indication too, to readers, of the route that was taken.

The early expectations by some of the academic discussants on my topic was that, most probably, a study on Isaac would simply teach us that Isaac cannot teach us anything new on the patriarchs of ancient Israel. This would have gone against my instinct to be innovative; however, I could made peace with that, in the light of the contributions of the most influential Old Testament scholar of the previous century, Gerhard von Rad, now being regarded as, mostly, “fruchtbare Mißverständnisse” (as Smend 1989:226 characterised him). Another of von Rad’s characteristics, though, was his drive to be new, which had great influence on me (cf. Lombaard 1994). To that initial impetus I have remained true, with the insights offered here. Even if they should in time turn out to be *Mißverständnisse*, the best any scholar could hope for is that they would be, at least in some form, *Fruchtbar*.

Those to whom I am indebted

Among all the persons who have had an impact on my academic work, I would like to thank, in chronological order, those whose influence I still feel most directly: JA du Rand, from whom I first learnt the importance of research, and the narrative method; AB du Toit and WS Prinsloo, who taught me structuralism and tied me to the text; W Vosloo, with whom I saw in practice the movement between ancient text and modern interpretation; JH le Roux, from whom I learnt historical exegesis, philosophy of history, proper theologising, a deep intellectualism and – based on these four – a piety drenched in these and other aspects of life *coram Deo* which has the strength to weather storms; and E Otto, from whom I learnt the importance of vigorous debate, both among colleagues and within the Old Testament texts.

Academic work is always highly individualistic; at the very same time, it is always a social event of sorts, with all the voices in one's reading history influencing, in ways that cannot ever be described, the words that flow from one's fingers. Then again, a writing such as this remains the responsibility of the individual author. Few things can be as rewarding as the academic loneliness of the long distance author...

To my wife, Dr Marlize Rabe (Sociology, Unisa), our children Stephan and Maria (our personal 9/11, though in age only), my parents, Maans and Anna Lombaard, my supervisor, Prof. Jurie le Roux, colleagues and friends, who have all shown their support in so many ways, my sincere thanks.

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