

## **The Book**

Michael Brady

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**Instructor:** Amy Acosta

What is art? To some it is the creative pen of a writer or the entrancing melody of their favorite song. To others it may be a painting on the wall or a sculpture in the den. Regardless of form, art is expression. It speaks to the very soul and allows a person to feel through the heart or see through the eyes of someone else. Art can be anything as long as it is expressed with passion and truth. People view art in search of this intimacy. The observer wants to be transported through space and time and have his or her very existence placed inside of the work, if only for a moment. Recently I visited the "Faculty Exhibition of 2005" at the Southeastern Louisiana University Art Gallery. As I browsed from one exhibit to another, one particular artist, John Valentino, continually grabbed my attention. Perhaps it was my fascination with historical texts or maybe the photorealism of the work itself that caught my eye. Either way, as I studied *Toldot*, I was instantly whisked away and found myself standing in the desert plains of ancient Sinai.

*Toldot* pays visual homage to the Genesis, chapter 26, story of Isaac and his struggles concerning the wells his father Abraham had dug in the land of Gerar. The story told by this painting is reminiscent of the countless struggles that a nation, conceived by the seed of Isaac, would face as a chosen people. The scrolls of the history of Israel are unique in that they depict not only the nation's greatness but also its many downfalls and defeats. It is in the almost supernatural ability to sustain existence despite great obstacles that I find great respect for the tiny nation of Israel and its history that *Toldot* represents.

There are two main features in this work. First is the foreground picture, which portrays a beautifully painted desert plain surrounded by foothills of sand. The other is the "framework" or

background of the piece, which is a very convincing replica of the ancient Hebrew scroll Berishith, or as we call it today, Genesis. The scroll is opened to where the story of Isaac is written, wonderfully complimenting the overall theme.

From a distance, the piece immediately captures the attention of the passerby with its unique stature. The mystical scroll invites the imagination to take flight with its appearance of grave importance. If one were to just glance, the craftsmanship of the scroll handles alone would all but beg the observer to come closer for a more intimate look. The detailed carvings show the work of a forgotten art with subtle hints of discoloration here and there giving the effect of wood that has well surpassed its lifespan.

Taking a closer look, the intricacies of the Hebrew lettering give validity to the scroll as a historical text that has heroically survived ruthless elements, but not without suffering some battle scars. Even though the ink is showing signs of fading, it remains bold enough to give the text an air of authority as one that refuses to simply fade away. The carefully plotted letters with their subtle undertones direct the eyes of the observer with the effectiveness of a highway traffic sign to the foreground.

The painting, marvelously inked onto the center of the scroll, offers a visual reference for the story. Complimentary hues of brown render the barren plain while contrasting tones of whites and pale blues make up the overflowing water wells giving them a lifelike appearance and texture. The stonework of the wells looks more like it was carefully laid by a master mason rather than inked by a skilled artist. The very existence of water in the desert scene is indicative of an iron willed people who, in spite of barren surroundings and impossible odds, are able to establish and maintain life.

One can imagine, while looking at *Toldot*, a strong, middle-aged Isaac laboring countless

hours to resurrect the vision of his father Abraham. One can feel the heat of the relentless desert sun as it bears its fury down on him, boiling the sweat out of his skin. The shadows of the desolate sand dunes are the only mental springboard needed to envision the herdsmen of Gerar as they lurk just out of sight, waiting for Isaac to bring life to the last of the wells before letting loose a massive attack to drive him out of the land. Finally, the lack of human presence in the painting suggests the outcome of the battle as Isaac and his people are forced to retreat.

This important piece of Hebrew history is one of many in the puzzle of Israel's past. The rocky beginnings of this nation seemed to turn mountainous as time progressed, yet it still held fast to its heritage. Even when the moral fabric of Israel was ripped to pieces, and the nation would want to throw its hands in the air, there would always come forth a remnant to bring remembrance to the people of what Israel is; a people chosen by God to be an example. That example has carried me through many battles. When I look at *Toldot*, I am reminded that as long as I hold tight to the things I believe in, I cannot be defeated.