

Genesis Chapter 23

Verses 1-2

Although Sarah's age, the only woman's age at death recorded in Scripture, might suggest her importance in God's plan.

It more importantly reminds of the birth of her only son well beyond childbearing age (at 90 years of age, 17:17), and of God's intervention to bring about the fulfillment of His word to her and Abraham.

Sarah's death occurred in 2028 B.C.

Genesis 23:1 "And Sarah was a hundred and seven and twenty years old: [these were] the years of the life of Sarah."

"And Sarah was a hundred and seven and twenty years old":

This following immediately upon the account of the offering up of Isaac, led many of the Jewish writers to conclude, that Isaac was then thirty seven years of age, as he must be when Sarah his mother was one hundred and twenty seven, for he was born when she was ninety years of age.

But this seems not to be observed on that account, but to give the sum of her age at her death, since it follows: these were the years of the life of Sarah.

Who, as it is remarked by many interpreters, is the only woman the years of whose life are reckoned up in Scripture.

After the flood, God reduced the time of life to 120 years, and so Sarah, Abraham's wife, lived a few more years.

Genesis 23:2 "And Sarah died in Kirjath-arba; the same [is] Hebron in the land of Canaan: and Abraham came to mourn for Sarah, and to weep for her."

"Kirjath-arba": This older name for Hebron (Josh. 14:15; Judges 1:10), means "City of Four."

Actually, it commemorates a hero of the Anakim (see note on 13:18).

It is a very natural thing to weep at the loss of a loved one.

It is even more stressful to lose your spouse.

It is as if some of you have been torn away, and truly it has, because they two are one flesh.

Hebron is approximately 20 miles out of Jerusalem.

Genesis 23:3 "And Abraham stood up from before his dead, and spake unto the sons of Heth, saying,"

“The sons of Heth”:

A settlement of Hittites whose original home was in Anatolia (modern-day Turkey), who had already been established in Canaan far from their homeland.

It is debatable whether the “Sons of Heth” were real Hittites or simply those who had learned to speak their language.

But such an encounter is illuminated by a knowledge of Hittite customs illustrated by their laws.

Hittite law required that the owner of a complete unit of land continue performing the king’s *ilku* (feudal services).

Genesis 23:4 "I [am] a stranger and a sojourner with you: give me a possession of a burying place with you, that I may bury my dead out of my sight."

“Give me a possession of a burying place”:

Negotiations for the purchase (“give” signifies here “sell”) of Hittite property was properly conducted in accordance with contemporary Hittite custom, with Abraham wanting to pay the market value for it (verse 9).

Even though this was the land that God had promised to Abraham, he did not own even one acre of this land at that time.

He really was saying to them (allow me to buy a burying place from you for my dead wife).

This land someday would all belong to the descendants of Abraham, and Abraham wanted his wife buried there in the Promised Land.

Genesis 23:5-6 "And the children of Heth answered Abraham, saying unto him," "Hear us, my lord: thou [art] a mighty prince among us: in the choice of our sepulchers bury thy dead; none of us shall withhold from thee his sepulcher, but that thou mayest bury thy dead."

“And the children of Heth answered Abraham”:

In a very civil and respectful manner: “saying unto him”, as follows:

“Hear us, my lord”:

One of them spake in the name of the rest, who calls Abraham not "our lord", but "my lord"; addressing him very honorably, and desires he would hear what he had to say on the behalf of others with himself.

“A mighty prince among us”:

Rank and reputation accorded Abraham a place of leadership and respect, leading his neighbors (the Hittites), to freely offer their best sepulchers to him.

They went on and arranged for Abraham to purchase a cave that belonged to a wealthy neighbor called Ephron (verses 7-9), unknown to Abraham.

“Mighty prince” as it appears (in verse 6), is a term generally translated “prince of God;” or “mighty prince.”

The term “nasi” (17:20) designates an official who has been elevated in or by the assembly, hence elected.

Here, it is an honorific epithet.

The Hittites were acknowledging that God (Elohim), had played a mighty part in Abraham’s life.

This was after Abraham had lived in the area for 62 years (12:4; 17:17; 23:1).

This term is similarly used in early texts of the chiefs of the Midianites (Josh. 13:21; Num. 25:18), and Shechem (Gen. 34:2).

The title is later applied to David and Solomon (1 Kings 11:34).

These children of Heth were aware that the blessings of God were upon Abraham.

They were excited to think that some of that blessing might be theirs, if they were cooperative with Abraham.

These sons of Heth were Hittites and descendants of Ham.

Any one of them would gladly have given a place of burying to this man of God.

Genesis 23:7 "And Abraham stood up, and bowed himself to the people of the land, [even] to the children of Heth."

"And Abraham stood up":

For, having made his speech to the children of Heth, he sat down waiting for an answer; or rather perhaps they obliged him to sit down, out of reverence to so great a personage; and when they had done speaking, he rose up.

"And bowed himself to the people of the land":

The principal of them, in token of the grateful sense he had of the honor they had done him, and of the great civility with which they had used him.

"Even to the children of Heth":

This seems to be added to distinguish them from the common people, and as an explanation of the preceding clause (see Genesis 23:3).

Genesis 23:8 "And he communed with them, saying, If it be your mind that I should bury my dead out of my sight; hear me, and entreat for me to Ephron the son of Zohar"

"And he communed with them":

Entered into a discourse and conversation with them upon the following subject.

"Saying, if it be your mind that I should bury my dead out of my sight":

That is, in some place belonging to them; otherwise they could have no objection to the burying of his wife anywhere else.

If now what they had said were not spoken in a satisfactory way, but it was their real mind and will, and they were sincere and hearty in it, and very desirous of obliging him with a place among them for the interment of his dead.

Then he had this favor to ask of them.

"Hear me, and entreat for me to Ephron the son of Zohar": A principal man among the Hittites, who had a field with a cave in it, near where Abraham dwelt, and very convenient for him, and for this purpose of his now under consideration.

This man seems to be present at this time, as appears from (Genesis 23:10); but Abraham did not think fit to address him directly himself, lest he should not so well and so easily succeed.

And therefore, entreats the princes of Heth to unite in a request to Ephron for the favor after mentioned, which he supposed they would not be opposed to, if they were hearty in this affair.

And, if Ephron was present, as he seems to be, it was a very handsome, honorable, and modest address to him through his brethren, which he could not with any politeness well withstand.

Abraham was humbled by their generosity and thus bowed.

Then he said, if it is your wish that I bury my dead here, please talk to Ephron for me.

"Ephron" means fawn-like, so he had to be a very congenial man.

His father, "Zohar", means whiteness.

Abraham had chosen the cave he wanted.

Genesis 23:9 "That he may give me the cave of Machpelah, which he hath, which [is] in the end of his field; for as much money as it is worth he shall give it me for a possession of a buryingplace amongst you."

“The cave of the field of Machpelah”:

This became the burial spot for Sarah, Abraham, Isaac, Rebekah, Leah, and Jacob.

Rachel is a notable exception (35:19).

“Which is in the end of his field.”:

Abraham would avoid transfer of these obligations to himself by purchasing only the cave.

You see, Abraham intended all along to pay for the burying place.

Genesis 23:10 "And Ephron dwelt among the children of Heth: and Ephron the Hittite answered Abraham in the audience of the children of Heth, [even] of all that went in at the gate of his city, saying,"

“Dwelt”:

Ephron was probably sitting at the city gate where business was usually transacted.

Genesis 23:11 "Nay, my lord, hear me: the field give I thee, and the cave that [is] therein, I give it thee; in the presence of the sons of my people give I it thee: bury thy dead."

“The field give I thee”:

This suggests not that Ephron felt generous, but that he was constrained by Hittite feudal policy, which tied ownership of land with service to the ruler.

Passing the land to Abraham would pass also dual responsibilities to Abraham, making him liable for all taxes and duties.

This Ephron was apparently anxious to do, thus the offer to give the land.

Ephron wanted to give this area to Abraham.

He offered to give it to Abraham in front of witnesses.

Abraham wanted to pay.

This was a running struggle to see who would weaken.

Genesis 23:12 "And Abraham bowed down himself before the people of the land."

“And Abraham bowed down himself before the people of the land”:

Showing hereby great respect, and giving much honor both to them and Ephron; and signifying that he had something to say, and desired audience of them, and humbly submitted to them what he should say.

Genesis 23:13 "And he spake unto Ephron in the audience of the people of the land, saying, But if thou [wilt give it], I pray thee, hear me: I will give thee money for the field; take [it] of me, and I will bury my dead there."

"And he spake unto Ephron in the audience of the people of the land":

He addressed himself to Ephron who spoke last, with an audible voice, so that all could hear him: saying:

“But if thou wilt give it, I pray thee, hear me”:

The words are very concise, and in the original text are only "if thou", and differently supplied; by some, "if thou art he".

Ephron, whom it is supposed Abraham knew not by face, or that he was present; which is not likely, since Abraham had lived in those parts now so as to be well known himself, and must know his neighbors; and had lived formerly here, and could not but know so great a prince as Ephron, whose city he dwelt in.

The Targum of Jonathan says:

"If thou art willing to do me a kindness, hear me;":

It will be taken as a favor to admit me to speak once more, and to grant what shall be desired.

"I will give thee the money for the field":

Abraham did not choose to receive it as a free gift, but to make a purchase of it, that it might be sure to him and his posterity; for though Ephron was now in this generous mood, he might change his mind, or hereafter reprimand Abraham with it, should he fall out with him, or his posterity might claim it again, and dispute his right to it.

"Take it of me":

the purchase money, the full worth of the field.

"And I will bury my dead there":

Or "then will I bury", and not before.

Abraham wanted the piece of land, but he wanted to pay for it, so that he would not be obligated to this people.

Genesis 23:14 "And Ephron answered Abraham, saying unto him,"

“And Ephron answered Abraham, saying unto him”:

The following words:

Genesis 23:15 "My lord, hearken unto me: the land [is worth] four hundred shekels of silver; what [is] that betwixt me and thee? Bury therefore thy dead."

"My lord, hearken unto me":

Since it is your mind to buy the field, and not receive it as a gift, then hear what I have to say as to the value of it.

"The land is worth four hundred shekels of silver":

Which, reckoning a shekel at two shillings and sixpence, comes to fifty pounds.

"What is that betwixt thee and me?"

Between two persons so rich, the sum was trifling and inconsiderable, whether the one paid it, and the other received it, or not; or between two such friends it was not worth speaking of, it was no matter whether it was paid or not.

Or else the sense is, between us both it is honestly worth so much; it is a good bargain, and must be owned to be so, what is it?

The sum is so small, and it is so clearly the worth of it, that there needs no more to be said about it anymore.

"Bury therefore thy dead":

In it, and give thyself no more trouble and concern about it.

They had finally come to a price, 400 shekels of silver.

The symbolism is great.

Again, silver means redemption.

He tried once more to tell Abraham that this small amount of money was unimportant, but Abraham wanted to pay.

Genesis 23:16 "And Abraham hearkened unto Ephron; and Abraham weighed to Ephron the silver, which he had named in the audience of the sons of Heth, four hundred shekels of silver, current [money] with the merchant."

“Shekels of silver, current money”:

Precious metals were not made into coins for exchange until centuries later.

Merchants maintained the shekel as the standard weight of value for business transactions.

A shekel weighed less than one half ounce.

The deal was finally settled.

Abraham paid in front of witnesses.

He would not be obligated.

With the words of the transaction, the careful description of the property, and the payment of the stated price all done before witnesses and at the proper place of business, ownership of the land officially passed to Abraham.

It was still binding years later in the time of Jacob (49:29-32, 50:12-13).

Genesis 23:17 "And the field of Ephron, which [was] in Machpelah, which [was] before Mamre, the field, and the cave which [was] therein, and all the trees that [were] in the field, that [were] in all the borders round about, were made sure"

However, Ephron insisted on selling the entire unit, “the field, and the cave”, as the conclusion repeatedly notes (verses 17, 19-20; 49:29-32, especially note verse 32).

The prominent mention of trees in the final agreement was another characteristic of the Hittite business documents (verse 17).

Since the Hittites were destroyed about 1200 B.C., the liberal critics’ assertion of a late date for the composition of Genesis is rejected at this point.

Genesis 23:18 "Unto Abraham for a possession in the presence of the children of Heth, before all that went in at the gate of his city."

"Unto Abraham for a possession":

To be enjoyed by him and his forever, as his own property, being purchased by his money.

"In the presence of the children of Heth":

They being witnesses of the bargain, and of the payment of the money by Abraham, and of the surrender of the field unto him, for his own use.

"Before all that went in at the gates of his city":

Not of Abraham's city for he had none, but of Ephron's city, which was Hebron (see Gen. 23:10).

These are either the same with the children of Heth, and so the clause is added by way of explanation, and including all the inhabitants of the place.

Or else different from them, they intending the princes of the people that composed the assembly Abraham addressed, and these are the common people, the inhabitants of the place.

Aben Ezra takes them to be the travelers that passed and re-passed through the gates of the city.

However, the design of the expression is to show in what a public manner this affair was transacted, and that the field was made as firm and as sure to Abraham as it could well be, no writings on such occasion being used so early.

This was very similar to us putting a fence around our property to secure it from the world around us.

This was showing Abraham's possession in the midst of a strange land.

Genesis 23:19 "And after this, Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field of Machpelah before Mamre: the same [is] Hebron in the land of Canaan."

"After this":

Once the purchase had been made, Abraham buried Sarah.

Moses notes the place is Hebron in Canaan, to which his initial readers were soon headed.

Many of the prominent Old Testament people were buried in this area.

Hebron is still in existence today in the Holy Land.

Genesis 23:20 "And the field, and the cave that [is] therein, were made sure unto Abraham for a possession of a burying place by the sons of Heth."

"And the field, and the cave that is therein, was made sure to Abraham for a possession of a buryingplace, by the sons of Heth":

Who were witnesses of the transaction between Abraham and Ephron; and this was further made sure by Sarah's being buried in it, which was taking possession of it, for the use for which it was bought for.

"And was a pledge and earnest of the future possession of the land of Canaan by the seed of Abraham for a burial place.

This was the first piece of ground in it possessed by Abraham and his seed; and it being called the possession of a burying place, shows that there is no contradiction between this and what Stephen says (Acts 7:5).

He had a possession to bury in, but not to live upon; not any ground of his own to till and sow, or build upon.

This is the last credit given to the sons of Heth for their being willing to sell this burying place to Abraham for Sarah's burial.

Genesis Chapter 23 Questions

1. How old was Sarah, when she died?
2. Where did she die?
3. When you lose a loved one, it is natural to _____.
4. Where was Hebron located?
5. Who did Abraham speak to about a burial place?
6. What did Abraham call himself?
7. How much of this land, that God had promised Abraham, belonged to him at that time?
8. What was Abraham trying to do?
9. What did these sons call Abraham?
10. Which of the sepulchers did they offer?
11. For what price?
12. Why did they like the idea of burying Sarah in their sepulchers?
13. Why did Abraham bow to them?
14. What does "Ephron" mean?

15. Whose cave did Abraham want?
16. What tribe was Ephron from?
17. Why did Abraham not want the land free?
18. What price did they agree upon?
19. This field was before where?
20. What is Hebron also called?