

## Genesis 23

This chapter records the death of Sarah and the purchase of a burial site for her. Sarah is truly the matriarch of the Israelite family. Her importance far outweighs the number of references made to her throughout the Scriptures. She is mentioned 55 times in the OT, either by “Sarai” or “Sarah.” Outside of Genesis she is only found once, in Isaiah 51:2. In the NT, Paul mentions her (Rom. 4:19; 9:9), the Hebrew writer mentions her (11:11), and Peter mentions her (1 Pet. 3:6). After this chapter, she is referenced again in Genesis at 24:36, 67; 25:10, 12; 49:31. This chapter also records Abraham’s purchase of her burial site, the cave of Machpelah. This was an act of faith that God would eventually settle His people in this land, similar to Jeremiah purchasing property in Judah prior to the Babylonian exile (32:6-15).

Sarah was 90 years old when Isaac was born (17:17; 21:5) and lived to be 127 years old (23:1). Isaac will marry at 40 years old (25:20) so that Isaac will live, and mourn, without his mother for three years (24:67). How he loved his mother!

### TRANSLATION - 23:1-18:

**1** Now they were the life of Sarah, one hundred twenty-seven years; the years [were] the life of Sarah. **2** Then Sarah died in Kiriath Arba. This [is] Hebron in the land of Canaan. Then Abraham came to lament for Sarah and to weep for her. **3** So Abraham arose from on the face of the dead and spoke to the sons of Heth saying, **4** “A stranger and a resident I [am] with you all. Give to me a possession of a grave with you all and let me bury my dead from before me.”

**5** Then the sons of Heth answered Abraham, saying, **6** “Listen to us, lord, prince of God. You, yourself, [are] among us. A choice place of our burial, bury your dead. A man among us his burial site he will not withhold from you, a burial site for your dead.”

**7** Then Abraham arose and bowed to the people of the land, to the sons of Heth. **8** Then he spoke to them, saying, “If there is with your soul to bury my dead from my face, listen to me. Plead for me with Ephron, son of Zohar. **9** So give to me the cave of Machpelah, which [belongs] to him, which [is] on the edge of his field. In full silver, let him give it to me, among you all for a possession of a burial site.”

**10** So Ephron was staying in the midst of the sons of Heth, and Ephron answered, the Hittite to Abraham, in the ears of the sons of Heth, for all those coming to the gate of the city, saying, **11** “No, my lord. Listen to me. The field I give to you and the cave which [is] in it, to you I give it. Before the eyes of the sons of my people I give it to you, a burial place for your dead.”

**12** Then Abraham bowed with his face to the people of the land. **13** And he spoke to Ephron in the ears of the people of the land, saying, “Only if you yourself would that you listen to me. I am giving silver [for] the field. Take from me and let me bury my dead there.”

**14** So Ephron answered Abraham, saying to him, **15** “Lord, listen to me. Land - four hundred shekels of silver, between me and you - what [is] it? Your dead, a burial place.”

**16** So Abraham listened to Ephron and weighed out for Ephron the silver which he spoke in the ears of the sons of Heth, four hundred shekels of silver, of those crossing to trade.

**17** He lifted the field of Ephron which [was] in Machpelah which was before Mamre, the field and the cave which [was] in it and all the trees which [were] in the field which [was] in all the surrounding boundaries **18** to Abraham for property before the eyes of the sons of Heth, those coming to the gate of their city.

### WORDS:

“Life (verse 1) is used 140 times. The word was used extensively in Genesis 1 & 2 and 7-9. “To lament” (verse 2; 30 times; only twice in Gen.: here and 50:10) suggests the idea of mourning the dead or to bewail. It is practically a synonym (in this context) for the next verb, to “weep” (114 times). The latter term can be found in both joyful and sorrowful contexts (its first use was in 21:16). There are more than a dozen synonyms for weeping in biblical Hebrew.

The word “resident” (verse 4; 14 times) is related to the word “to stay, remain, or live.” The words “stranger” and “resident” might be a hendiadys, where two words carry one idea, like a “long-term resident.” It suggests someone without the benefits of citizenship. “Possession” (66 times; first used in 17:8) can mean “property” or “place.” “Prince” (130 times) can mean “chief, leader, prince.” It is followed by the word “God,” which some Hebrew scholars want to translate as a superlative, “mighty prince.” Count the number of times the verb “bury” or noun “burial place” is found in this text. In the OT, the verb is found 133 times, the burial site, 67 times, and a related word for burial site, 14 times.

“Weighed” (verse 16; 23 times) is a related verb for the noun, shekel (88 times). “To trade” (21 times) refers to traveling traders or merchants.

#### ARCHAEOLOGY:

Kiriath Arba and Hebron refer to the same location (Judges 1:10; Joshua 14:15). It was located 20 miles (35 km) south of Jerusalem toward Beer Sheba. “Arba” is the Hebrew word for “four” so some think this might be a designation of “four cities,” which might have included Aner, Eschol, Mamre and Hebron.

“Sons of Heth” were introduced in 10:15. They are found fourteen times in the Bible and are related, in some way, with the Hittites (23:10). Ezekiel will later describe the Israelites as being from their mother, the Hittite (16:3).

The cave of Machpelah will be the burial site, not just of Sarah, but of Abraham (25:9), Isaac, Rebekah, Leah, and Jacob (49:30-32; 50:13). Jews believed, in the time of Herod the Great, they still knew where the burial site was located so that today, it is marked as a holy site: the Cave of the Patriarchs at Hebron. It is 200’ by 110’ (61 x 33.5 m) similar to Herod’s temple mount in Jerusalem.

#### COMMENTS:

Sarah is the matriarch of the Israelite family. She is the only woman of whom the Bible records the age of her death. She was blessed by God with a very long life. She and Abraham were emotionally close and Abraham lamented, mourned, and wailed her death. The details of his memorial service are not given but in other, later, biblical texts, we learn that mourners would often tear their clothes, mess up the hair, cut the beard, beat themselves on the breast, fast, and throw dust or ashes on their heads. Other cultures would even cut themselves (1 Kings 18:28).

Without a place to bury Sarah, a permanent place, Abraham approached his neighbors, the family of Heth, the Hittites, to obtain a burial place for his beloved wife. The sons of Heth express a strong degree of courtesy in asking Abraham to listen closely to them. They speak respectfully to him, calling him “lord,” as well as a “prince of God,” or “mighty prince.” This was not a royal title but expressed their respect for him and his position among them. This is a sharp contrast with Lot’s reception among the Sodomites, at least in chapter 19. The Hittites offer any place for a burial place for his dead, even offering that no one would refuse him a place to bury his dead. There is a strong degree of respect exhibited by the sons of Heth.

Abraham responds with equal magnanimity, arising and then bowing to the ground, in humble respect for the owners of the land. This is the only time and place when Abraham bows to any inhabitants of Canaan. He asks if it is “with their soul,” a way of saying “pleasing to them,” he would like the cave of Machpelah which belonged to Ephron. It appears that Abraham had already scouted around and decided on a place where he might begin burying his family, in this land promised him by Jehovah God.

Beginning in verse 10, Ephron expresses just as much courtesy as everyone else. Count the number of times he uses the verb “to give.” This transaction, as always, was being conducted at the gates of the city of Kiriath Arba, in public. Ephron offers to give Abraham the cave and its surrounding field. We do not know how much land was associated with the cave.

Abraham refuses the kind offer of Ephron of a free field but offers to give him money (silver) for the burial place. Perhaps, if it were only a gift, Ephron could take it back once

Abraham had died. Count the number of times the participants have called on the other to “listen” as they speak. Ephron responds to Abraham by suggesting that the value of 400 shekels of silver for the field should not stop him from burying his dead, beloved wife. While 400 shekels of silver would be a weighty gift, since we do not know how much land was offered nor the value of the land itself, we do not know if the price was exorbitant or not. Was the land worth 400 shekels of silver (over seven pounds)? It was to Abraham. Remember that in 20:16, Abimelech had given Abraham 1,000 shekels of silver. Even though Abraham was already wealthy, God provided even more for the upcoming purchase of a grave for his wife.

The average worker in those days, apparently, would earn ten shekels of silver each year. David paid fifty shekels for the site of the temple (2 Sam. 24:24). Jeremiah paid seventeen shekels for the field in Anathoth (32:9). Omri paid 6,000 shekels for the whole site of the city of Samaria (1 Kings 16:24). But we still can’t compare these to the field of Ephron since we do not know how much land was there nor how valuable the land itself was.

Verse 16 is the first time in the text that the verb “to listen” is *not* an imperative. Abraham accepted Ephron’s value of the field and gave him 400 shekels of silver, according to the valuation assigned it by passing traders.

After the very cordial exchange, Ephron apparently staked out the land, as modern surveyors would do, and gave all the appropriate land to Abraham. The trees are included, perhaps as boundary markers. This was all done, again, in the eyes of all the people of the city of Kiriath Arba who were at the city gate that day.

Abraham finally has a piece of land (and a well) in the promised land.

#### APPLICATION:

*Contemporaries of Moses* - The Israelites, the first recipients of Genesis, were coming out of the land of Egypt and would be encouraged that their patriarchs and matriarchs were buried in the land of Canaan, in anticipation of that generation of Israelites inhabiting the land. They would still be described as “strangers and residents” in the land under Moses: Lev. 25:23.

*Later Hebrew writers* - The terms “strangers and residents” would describe Israel later in their history: 1 Chron. 29:15; Psa. 39:12.

#### TRANSLATION - 23:19-20:

**19** So after these things, Abraham buried Sarah, his wife, at the cave of the field of Machpelah, before the face of Mamre. This [is] Hebron in the land of Canaan. **20** He lifted up the field and the cave which [was] in it to Abraham, for a possession of a burial site from the sons of Heth.

#### COMMENTS:

Moses summarized the whole incident here in these last two verses. There was no doubt that Abraham had a place in the promised land to call his own, even if it was just a cave with the dead body of his wife. When people were buried in caves, their bodies were allowed to decompose down to the bones. At that point, the bones would be cleared to the back of the cave or moved into a container to make room for another body.

#### APPLICATION:

*Contemporaries in the text* - “Though it took him more than a hundred years to get there, Abraham finally learned that God provides, that he will do what he has promised.”<sup>1</sup>

*NT writers* - In Acts 7:16, Stephen rehearses the history of the nation of Israel and alludes to the tomb purchased by Abraham.

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<sup>1</sup> Whitworth, *in loc.*