

## **Genesis 23:1-20**

### **The Death of Sarah**

Abraham had passed his test. When God called, he had been listening. Abraham had been attentive to God's voice. And, when God had called, Abraham had responded. Abraham did not hold back from God what was most precious to him. He did not reserve for himself parts of his life that were his alone. Also, by being willing to sacrifice Isaac in obedience to God's command, Abraham had trusted God with his future. He had believed God would do what God had said He would do. And Isaac had learned from this experience as well. He had seen the faith of his father. It was a faith so profound that even the life of his son was not more important than obedience to his God.

Now the attention of the biblical narrative turns to the death of Sarah. She is a rather minor character in Scripture. Virtually each time she is mentioned, it is in the context of her relationship either to her husband, Abraham, or to her son, Isaac. And as we will see, even in her death, the focus is on Abraham purchasing her burial site.

#### **Sarah's Death**

The death of Sarah was recorded matter-of-factly by the author. <sup>1</sup>“Now Sarah lived one hundred and twenty-seven years; these were the years of the life of Sarah. <sup>2</sup>Sarah died in Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan; and Abraham went in to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her” (v. 1-2). That Sarah lived such a long life was seen by the culture as being a blessing from God. Long life was often pictured in Scripture as a reward from God. Think of Moses, for example. “Although Moses was one hundred and twenty years old when he died, his eye was not dim, nor his vigor abated” (Deuteronomy 34:7). Scripture also informs us that Abraham was one hundred thirty-seven at her death, and Isaac was thirty-seven. Thus the family had sojourned in Canaan and its environs for some sixty-two years, or nearly one-half of Sarah's life.

The place where Sarah died was Kiriath-arba, a word that means “city of four.” It likely refers to the collection of small settlements known in Abraham's time as Hebron, Mamre, Aner, and Eschol. We can remember when Abraham was resting in the afternoon shade with his companions when he received the news of the capture of Lot by armies of the invading four kings, “then a fugitive came and told Abram the Hebrew. Now he was living by the oaks of Mamre the Amorite, brother of Eshcol and brother of Aner, and these were allies with Abram” (Genesis 14:13). It would seem that at the time, these other men each controlled a settlement in the area. Over the centuries from Abraham until the time of Moses, when Genesis was written, these four cities fused into the one known as Hebron.

Scripture tells us that Abraham wept for his wife. We can imagine his grief and picture his mourning. Their culture honored their dead loudly, with the ritualistic tearing of clothes, sitting in dirt or putting dust and ashes on the head, or even shaving the head entirely as part of the custom. How long Abraham and Sarah had been together Scripture does not say, but it could have been as much as one hundred years. One cannot envisage the intimacy of their relationship. Like any couple, they had shared blessings and troubles. But theirs seem to have been extreme. In the middle of life, they had uprooted themselves from all they had known and traveled to a distant land. They had endured famine. They had learned through

their own bad decisions. They had seen God protect them in war. They had waited, and waited for God to keep His promises. Finally, they had seen their son born. All the experiences of a lifetime would be remembered by Abraham as he looked into the face of his departed wife.

### **The Purchase of the Burial Site**

Sarah had died and needed to be buried. The idea of burying Sarah in Canaan is an indication of the permanency of Abraham there. Importantly, Abraham did not return to the land of his fathers in Haran to bury his wife in the ancestral tombs that were undoubtedly there. Abraham was no longer to be an alien. Canaan would now become his homeland, and it would become the land of his descendants, as God had promised. This truth was reflected in the fact that both Jacob and Joseph, though they died in Egypt, insisted that their remains be brought home to be buried in Canaan.

“<sup>29</sup>Then he [Jacob] charged them and said to them, ‘I am about to be gathered to my people; bury me with my fathers in the cave that is in the field of Ephron the Hittite, <sup>30</sup>in the cave that is in the field of Machpelah, which is before Mamre, in the land of Canaan, which Abraham bought along with the field from Ephron the Hittite for a burial site. <sup>31</sup>There they buried Abraham and his wife Sarah, there they buried Isaac and his wife Rebekah, and there I buried Leah - <sup>32</sup>the field and the cave that is in it, purchased from the sons of Heth.’ <sup>33</sup>When Jacob finished charging his sons, he drew his feet into the bed and breathed his last, and was gathered to his people” (Genesis 49:29-33).

“<sup>24</sup>Joseph said to his brothers, ‘I am about to die, but God will surely take care of you and bring you up from this land to the land which He promised on oath to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob.’ <sup>25</sup>Then Joseph made the sons of Israel swear, saying, ‘God will surely take care of you, and you shall carry my bones up from here’” (Genesis 50:24-25).

So, to acquire a site for the burial, Abraham, “<sup>3</sup>spoke to the sons of Heth, saying, <sup>4</sup>‘I am a stranger and a sojourner among you; give me a burial site among you that I may bury my dead out of my sight’” (v. 3-4). These “sons of Heth” were descendants of Canaan (Genesis 10:15). They were one of many groups that dwelt in Canaan, and apparently, as Abraham had moved about with his flocks and herds, they were now the people nearest him. Eventually, Esau would marry a daughter from this tribe (Genesis 26:34), much to the grief of his mother. In that passage as well as in others (Genesis 15:20), the sons of Heth are referred to as Hittites.

This linguistic detail has led to some confusion, since modern historians are very well acquainted with the Hittite people who reached their zenith in Anatolia (modern Turkey) from 1700-1200 BC. Those Hittites were Indo-European, not Semitic, and never settled in any great number in southern Canaan. Eventually, members of that civilization made their way to the area of modern Syria where they formed new kingdoms such as Aleppo, Hamath, and Carchemish. By the time of Joshua (1400 BC), they had begun to dominate much of this region, though God promised the Israelites that they would possess the land. “From the wilderness and this Lebanon, even as far as the great river, the river Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites, and as far as the Great Sea toward the setting of the sun will be your territory” (Joshua 1:4).

The challenge here is that at the time of Sarah's death, when Abraham is attempting to purchase the burial plot, it is approximately 2029 BC, thus several centuries before the Hittite civilization known to historians had developed. However, since the Hittites mentioned in the Pentateuch have Semitic names such as Ephron, there is no reason to conclude that these are the same people as found in the historical record many centuries later. They are simply a separate group, unrelated to the Hittites of Anatolia.

Despite the fact that Abraham intended to make Canaan his homeland, in keeping with the promises of God, Abraham began by reminding his audience that he was an alien among them, "a stranger and sojourner" as he put it. The Hebrew phrasing implied social and economic dependence, as well as the physical reality of not owning any land. Abraham was aware that though he had become wealthy in terms of livestock and servants, he was landless. All of his possessions were portable. This was important because it may have been the very transitory nature of his status that persuaded the Canaanites to allow him to live among them in the first place. After all, how powerful could Abraham become without any walled cities at his command? That was why, I think, Abraham made it clear that he was not desiring to acquire a settlement, but merely a burial plot. He had no intention of building a city or developing fortifications. He merely wanted to bury his wife.

This request began an intricate exchange between Abraham and the local leaders.

<sup>5</sup>"The sons of Heth answered Abraham, saying to him, <sup>6</sup>"hear us, my lord, you are a mighty prince among us; bury your dead in the choicest of our graves; none of us will refuse you his grave for burying your dead." <sup>7</sup>So Abraham rose and bowed to the people of the land, the sons of Heth. <sup>8</sup>And he spoke with them, saying, "if it is your wish for me to bury my dead out of my sight, hear me, and approach Ephron the son of Zohar for me, <sup>9</sup>that he may give me the cave of Machpelah which he owns, which is at the end of his field; for the full price let him give it to me in your presence for a burial site." <sup>10</sup>Now Ephron was sitting among the sons of Heth; and Ephron the Hittite answered Abraham in the hearing of the sons of Heth; even of all who went in at the gate of his city, saying, <sup>11</sup>"no, my lord, hear me; I give you the field, and I give you the cave that is in it. In the presence of the sons of my people I give it to you; bury your dead." <sup>12</sup>And Abraham bowed before the people of the land. <sup>13</sup>He spoke to Ephron in the hearing of the people of the land, saying, "if you will only please listen to me; I will give the price of the field, accept it from me that I may bury my dead there." <sup>14</sup>Then Ephron answered Abraham, saying to him, <sup>15</sup>"my lord, listen to me; a piece of land worth four hundred shekels of silver, what is that between me and you? So bury your dead." <sup>16</sup>Abraham listened to Ephron; and Abraham weighed out for Ephron the silver which he had named in the hearing of the sons of Heth, four hundred shekels of silver, commercial standard. <sup>17</sup>So Ephron's field, which was in Machpelah, which faced Mamre, the field and cave which was in it, and all the trees which were in the field, that were within all the confines of its border, were deeded over <sup>18</sup>to Abraham for a possession in the presence of the sons of Heth, before all who went in at the gate of his city" (v. 5-18).

This narrative is a fine illustration of the delicate bargaining between peers that occurred in many ancient societies, and the Hebrew culture was no exception. A similar transaction a millennium later reflected the same experience.

<sup>21</sup>"As David came to Ornan, Ornan looked and saw David, and went out from the threshing floor

and prostrated himself before David with his face to the ground. <sup>22</sup>Then David said to Ornan, ‘give me the site of this threshing floor, that I may build on it an altar to the Lord; for the full price you shall give it to me, that the plague may be restrained from the people.’ <sup>23</sup>Ornan said to David, ‘take it for yourself; and let my lord the king do what is good in his sight. See, I will give the oxen for burnt offerings and the threshing sledges for wood and the wheat for the grain offering; I will give it all.’ <sup>24</sup>But King David said to Ornan, ‘no, but I will surely buy it for the full price; for I will not take what is yours for the Lord, or offer a burnt offering which costs me nothing.’ <sup>25</sup>So David gave Ornan 600 shekels of gold by weight for the site” (1 Chronicles 21:21-25).

Notice that in each situation the speeches to each other were courteous and the posturing was deferential. Each person tried not to give offense to the other, yet each also was determined to attain their desired end. In our narrative, for Abraham that desired end was a burial plot, for Ephron it was a fair price.

Abraham had begun by asking for a burial plot, and now the “sons of Heth” answered by addressing Abraham as “my lord” and acknowledging that he was “a mighty prince” (v. 6) among them. The Hebrew text actually offers the possible inference that Abraham was being addressed not just as a “mighty prince,” but as a prince of God, since the word used is *‘lōhīm*. Just as Abimelech had recognized that God was with Abraham, so too did these other Canaanites. He had been an acquaintance of the Pharaoh of Egypt and the ally of the king of Gerar. His skill in battle must have been known to all in the area. Abraham’s reputation had preceded him.

The leaders offered to give Abraham “the choicest of [their] graves” (v. 6) and insisted that no one among them would refuse the honor of doing so. This may seem generous to the reader, but it must be remembered that this was likely a stylized negotiation, and each person knew their part.

Abraham may have been flattered, but he was also humble. As he had done when offered his share of the spoils after defeating the invading kings (Genesis 14:22-23), Abraham wanted no special treatment. Instead, he “rose and bowed to the people” (v. 7) before responding to their offer. Curiously, though Abraham had been before other kings, such as Abimelech, this is the only specific instance where Scripture records Abraham as bowing before the inhabitants of Canaan. In any case, Abraham had already done his research and had a plot of land in mind. He suggested that “the cave of Machpelah” (v. 9) owned by Ephron the son of Zohar would do nicely.

Ephron heard Abraham’s request at the city gate where he was sitting. The text is unclear as to whether this is a continuation of the same dialogue, or a separate conversation later after the “sons of Heth” had visited Ephron. In any case, the city gate was the common gathering place for local leaders and business of many kinds was done there. Economic transactions such as this were negotiated, marriages were arranged, and even political decisions were made. Both those living in the city itself and those traveling had access to this very public area.

Thus the location meant that there was a public awareness of the transaction, “all who went in at the gate of his city” (v. 10) heard. Other community leaders in the inner circle as well as those who just happened

to be nearby observing would be witnesses to whatever events transpired. This was an invaluable tool in cultures that were pre-literate or kept scant written records. The collective memory was crucial to keeping order in these societies.

Ephron was determined to appear to be generous. “No, my lord, hear me; I give you the field, and I give you the cave that is in it” (v. 11). Importantly, we must notice that not only did Ephron offer Abraham a burial site, but in fact he offered him land as well. The offer of land was much more significant. On the land he acquired, Abraham *could* establish himself. On that field he *could* build a fortification. This was a very generous offer not because it was offered as a gift (that was merely a negotiating tactic), but because of what was offered.

Abraham responded in kind. Again he “bowed before the people of the land” (v. 12). He did not want to take the field as a gift. Perhaps Abraham, always with an eye to deception I’m afraid, believed that if he bought the property outright the purchase could not be rescinded, whereas a gift could, perhaps, be taken back. Abraham did, however, recognize the importance of the offer of the field as well as the cave. Thus he incorporated that part of Ephron’s offer into his counterproposal, “I will give the price of the field” (v. 13).

It was now Ephron’s turn. The property to be acquired had been agreed upon, but not its value. So, Ephron suggested a price, claiming that it was “a piece of land worth four hundred shekels of silver” (v. 15). Abraham readily accepted the price. Though he had negotiated with God for the lives of those in Sodom, Abraham did not haggle with Ephron in this case. The price had been stated, and Abraham reached for his bag of money.

Commentators disagree on the bargain Abraham made. Some point to the fact that Ephron seemed to indicate that a mere 400 shekels was an insignificant amount, “what is that between me and you?” (v. 15). Of course, as the seller, it would have been to Ephron’s advantage to make it seem to Abraham that he was getting a good price. Other commentators observe that Jeremiah paid only seventeen shekels when he purchased his cousin’s field (Jeremiah 32:9), and David paid only fifty shekels for the threshing floor of Araunah when he wanted to build an altar to God (2 Samuel 24:24).

That the silver needed to be weighed was an indication that there was no standard coinage used, but rather a shekel measured by weight. This makes it virtually impossible to know for certain the value of the land on relative terms. Standardized silver coinage was a later development, for example the sanctuary shekel, “this is what everyone who is numbered shall give: half a shekel, according to the shekel of the sanctuary (the shekel is twenty gerahs), half a shekel as a contribution to the Lord” (Exodus 30:13).

In any case, Abraham “weighed out for Ephron the silver which he had named in the hearing of the sons of Heth, four hundred shekels of silver, commercial standard” (v. 16). All who witnessed the negotiation now saw the money being counted and weighed. One cannot help but wonder if the shekels Abraham used for purchasing the burial site were from the one thousand shekels that he had received from Abimelech as a vindication of Sarah’s integrity and purity (Genesis 20:16).

The details of the transaction were clear to all who witnessed the occasion. “<sup>17</sup>Ephron’s field, which was in Machpelah, which faced Mamre, the field and cave which was in it, and all the trees which were in the field, that were within all the confines of its border, were deeded over <sup>18</sup>to Abraham for a possession in the presence of the sons of Heth, before all who went in at the gate of his city” (v. 17-18). The specificity is intended to remove any future quarrels as to grazing rights, water access, and even the use of timber. It should be noted that the wording does not necessarily mean that a written deed was made, only that the transfer of the property had legal standing.

Thus the promises of land made to Abraham throughout his life (Genesis 12:7, 13:15, 13:17, 15:7-8, 15:18, 17:8, 22:17) began to be fulfilled here. But as with the promise of a child, God moved according to His own timetable. This field and cave were all of Canaan that Abraham ever possessed himself.

### **Sarah’s Burial**

“<sup>19</sup>After this, Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field at Machpelah facing Mamre (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan. <sup>20</sup>So the field and the cave that is in it, were deeded over to Abraham for a burial site by the sons of Heth” (v. 19-20). Thus the narrative concludes. No mention is made of the act of the burial, and Abraham’s feelings at placing his wife in the tomb are hidden from us. Eventually Abraham would be buried beside her (Genesis 25:9), as would their son, Isaac (Genesis 35:27-29), and grandson, Jacob (Genesis 49:30, 50:13).

### **Takeaways**

As we said, Sarah played a supporting role in the biblical narrative. The focus was on Abraham as the receiver of the promises of God. But we cannot forget that all that Abraham received was shared by Sarah as well. She was not commanded to “go” perhaps, but rather to “go along with” her husband. Abraham may have been promised a child, but it was Sarah who had the burden of child bearing.

Yet, though a minor character, Scripture does remember Sarah.

“By faith even Sarah herself received ability to conceive, even beyond the proper time of life, since she considered Him faithful who had promised” (Hebrews 11:11).

“<sup>5</sup>For in this way in former times the holy women also, who hoped in God, used to adorn themselves, being submissive to their own husbands; <sup>6</sup>just as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord, and you have become her children if you do what is right without being frightened by any fear” (1 Peter 3:5-6).

Thus Sarah is remembered as a woman of faith and obedience. Though she had her moments of failure, remember Hagar, Scripture commends her for her faithfulness and submission. That is not a bad way to be remembered.