

Genesis 23: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Genesis chapter 23. Sarah lived 127 years. These were the years of the life of Sarah. And Sarah died at Kiriath Arbor, that is Hebron, in the land of Canaan. And Abraham went in to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her. And Abraham rose up from before his dead and said to the Hittites, I am a sojourner and a foreigner among you. Give me property among you for a burying place, that I may bury my dead out of my sight. The Hittites answered Abraham, Hear us, my lord, you are a prince of God among us. Bury your dead in the choicest of our tombs. None of us will withhold from you his tomb to hinder you from burying your dead. Abraham rose and bowed to the Hittites, the people of the land. And he said to them, If you are willing that I should bury my dead out of my sight, hear me and entreat for me Ephron the son of Zohar, that he may give me the cave of Machpelah, which he owns. It is at the end of his field. For the full price let him give it to me in your presence as property for a burying place.

Now Ephron was sitting among the Hittites. And Ephron the Hittite answered Abraham in the hearing of the Hittites, of all who went in at the gate of the city. No, my lord, hear me. I give you the field and I give you the cave that is in it. In the sight of the sons of my people I give it to you.

Bury your dead. Then Abraham bowed down before the people of the land. And he said to Ephron in the hearing of the people of the land, But if you will hear me, I give the price of the field.

Accept it from me that I may bury my dead there. Ephron answered Abraham, My lord, listen to me, a piece of land worth four hundred shekels of silver. What is that between you and me?

Bury your dead. Abraham listened to Ephron and Abraham weighed out for Ephron the silver that he had named in the hearing of the Hittites, four hundred shekels of silver, according to the weights current among the merchants. So the field of Ephron in Machpelah, which was to the east of Mamre, the field with the cave that was in it, and all the trees that were in the field throughout its whole area, was made over to Abraham as a possession in the presence of the Hittites, before all who went in at the gate of the city. After this, Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field of Machpelah, east of Mamre, that is Hebron, in the land of Canaan. The field and the cave that is in it were made over to Abraham as property for a burying place by the Hittites.

[2 : 3 6] In Genesis chapter 23, Sarah dies. She dies at the age of 127. Is there any significance to this number? Some have pointed out that it's the seventh centred hexagonal number, and she gives birth to Isaac at the age of 91, which is the sixth centred hexagonal number. Maybe there's something to this.

I don't think that's the first place I'd look though. There are possible connections with the story of Esther that were worth noting. If you look at the story of Esther, the story is introduced to us with a reference to 127 provinces in chapter 1 verse 1. In chapter 8 verse 9, we read of the king's scribes, and they're sending messages to 127 provinces. And in chapter 9 verse 30, you have 120 provinces again mentioned. Now, why could there be some sort of connection here? Why repeat this number three times within the story of Esther? If you look at the story of Sarah, and if you look at the story of Esther, there are all sorts of parallels. So maybe it's a detail that tips us off to the connection.

What would the connection be? Could it be that the book of Esther is merely giving redundant details? Perhaps. I think there's something more going on here though. If you look at the character of Sarah and Esther, both of them are taken by a king on account of their beauty, taken into the royal harem. Both have to hide their identities in the king's palace. In both cases, there's a threat to the seed, a threat to Isaac, and a threat also to Israel as a whole. Esther presents us with a Sarah-like character who plays a far more active role in delivering her people. Sarah's role might often be seen as very passive as she just goes along with Abraham, much as Esther goes along with Mordecai to some extent. But Esther is a far more active character, and I think maybe gives us a perspective upon Sarah that we might not find elsewhere. As in various other cases that we've seen, recognizing the connections between the stories in places like Genesis and stories elsewhere in scripture will help us to read certain characters, to understand the roles that they are playing, how they are more significant perhaps than we might otherwise have presumed. If the story of the Shunammite woman in 2 Kings chapter 4 allows us to imagine a more active role for Sarah in the binding of Isaac's story, the story of Esther in the book of Esther helps us to imagine a more active role for Sarah in the court of Pharaoh or Abimelech.

Sarah dies in the land of Canaan in Kiriath Arbor, and Abraham goes to mourn for her. It suggests perhaps that Abraham is operating elsewhere at the time. Maybe he's out with his flocks in some other part of the land and then comes back to Sarah when she dies. Abraham's concern then at this point is to bury his dead within the land. He has not yet received the land, he's still living outside of it, and he wants to have some sort of foothold in the land, sort of down payment, a sense that he will have a place within the land that will be a guarantee of his future inheritance. When people are buried there, there's also a resurrection theme that can come into play. Later on in the story of Jacob, Jacob will be very concerned that he is buried within the land of Canaan. As he's buried within the land, there is a recognition that they truly belong there and that one day God will act and that this will be their homeland. And so burying the people within the land is an act of faith in that future possession.

Likewise, in the story of Joseph, his body is taken up out of Egypt with the exodus. So much attention is given to burials in the story of Genesis because the connection between the people and the land is such an important part of the story. Abraham is a foreigner and a sojourner among the people of Canaan.

[6 : 38] He's a resident alien. He's not just a stranger from outside, but someone who is dwelling within the land or has connections with the land. He asks for property for a burial place among them that he might bury his dead. Now what he's looking for is not just a site to bury his dead. He's looking for a property, a holding within the land. And there's a difference between just being given a certain area of land that he can use and having a holding, something that is truly his. And there are many people who would be quite happy to say to Abraham, you can bury her in our plot. But he wants something more than that. He wants something that is truly his, not just the allowance of someone else's property and the extension of hospitality. He wants a possession. It's like being in someone else's house and they say, you're very welcome to stay. You can use this room whenever you want and make yourself at home. But making yourself at home is a very different thing from actually having a home. And so if you were to say to the person who invited you in that way, I want to buy that room. I want it to be my own in the full sense. I don't just want to be a guest. That would be the sort of thing that Abraham is doing at this point. He's not going to just accept a gift or hospitality. He wants to have a stake in this land, a particular territory that will be a down payment of his future inheritance. And so the negotiation and haggling that occurs after this is important. The people say you're a mighty prince or a prince of God. He's maybe a spiritual leader among them too. A priest-like leader who has established altars within the land and they will treat him with honour and respect. In fact, it might seem as if Abraham is being given the opportunity to become one of the Hittites himself. He can bury his dead in Hittite land, have a plot among them and perhaps be one of the Hittite princes. They will give him choicest of their possessions, not going to be withholding anything from him. But he would have to consider himself as one of them rather than having a possession of his own distinct from theirs. And Abraham's not going to accept that.

That's not what he's looking for. So he talks about the cave of Machpelah. He wants this particular double cave, a two-layered cave for his possession. He wants the end of the field, the field of Ephron, the son of Zohar. He doesn't ask for the whole field. He wants the cave alone. And Ephron talks with him saying that he will give him the field and the cave that is in it and on three separate occasions says bury your dead and gives him that grant. But that's again not what Abraham wants.

He does not just want hospitality. He does not want a gift. He wants a possession. When we think about a gift, for instance, if someone gives you something, you can be beholden to them. You have a responsibility to them. You have to show gratitude in certain ways. Whereas if you buy something generally, when you purchase something, the relationship between you and the person you purchase it from is dissolved immediately upon the purchase. You've fulfilled your obligation to them. If they give you something, you are beholden to them. And if you purchase something, you are not beholden to them in the same way. And Abraham is very concerned that he possesses this in the right way. Ephron offers him not just the cave, but the field as well. He quite possibly knows that Abraham is not going to be satisfied with this, but wants to get Abraham to give him more money by offering the field and the cave.

Whereas Abraham just wants the cave. Abraham returns. Abraham responds by bowing down and speaking to Ephron saying, if you will give it, I will give you money for the field. Take it from me and I will bury my dead there. And he answers again, but does not really directly answer Abraham. He answers him in an implicit way. My Lord, listen to me. The land is worth 400 shekels of silver. What is that between you and me? So bury your dead. What he is given is the price that he believes the land is worth, or at least the price that he wants from Abraham. He knows that Abraham wants to pay for the land, that he wants it as a possession. And the amount that he asks is a huge amount. He's hoping that as Abraham is an exceedingly rich man, he will be able to pay something that's about 50 years of a regular wage on his labor. This is a lot of money to ask for a possession, particularly when you compare it to the amount that's paid for places in other parts of scripture. The potter's field that's bought with the money for which Jesus is betrayed is 30 shekels of silver. This is 400 and it's a huge amount.

It gives you also a sense of just how rich Abraham is at this point. In these negotiations, Abraham is willing to pay this amount of money to have a possession in the land, even if it's just a field and a cave. It's a place that he can call his own, a first peg placed down into the land.

[11 : 20] It's a sign of his confidence in God's fulfillment of his promise. This is his land, the land that is promised to him. And by burying his dead there, he's expressing confidence that God will raise his people up from the death-like slumber of Egypt and that he will be brought in to the possession of this land. God had placed Abraham himself into slumber, telling him that he would bring his people up and into the possession of the land. And now by burying his dead within the land, he's praying or anticipating that same thing. Burying the dead within the land is a sign of resurrection faith that one day God will return them from the death-like slumber of Egypt. Joseph's statement concerning his body at the end of the book of Genesis anticipates the same thing, hoping that they will bring his body up as they leave Egypt. That's the way that the story of Genesis ends. This site then is a memorial that all will be theirs on a future occasion. It's not just a gift, it's not just hospitality from the Hittites, there is not just a sense of honour given to a resident alien who is respected among them.

This is a sign of possession, that they own this property, it's truly their own, and one day that they will own all of the land. Abraham, as he spoke to the king of Sodom, refused to accept any of the spoil from his hands. He did not want to say that a king of Sodom had made him rich. Likewise, he does not want to say that he is beholden to the Hittites, that he is their guest, that he has received the land from their hands, that he is beholden to them in some respect, to return in some manner something to them. No, he buys it from them so that he can say that only God has made him rich, that this possession will come from God alone, who is the owner of heaven and earth. A question to meditate upon.

Genesis chapter 23 speaks of Abraham buying a field and a cave as sites for burial. In the story of the Gospels, we have two burial places referred to, a field that's bought as a burial place, and a tomb or cave in which Jesus' body is buried. What insights might be gained from holding these two stories, these two fields, these two caves alongside each other, and reflecting upon the similarities and the contrasts?