

Genesis 23:1 – 20

¹ Now Sarah lived one hundred and twenty-seven years; these were the years of the life of Sarah. ² 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. ³ Then Abraham rose from before his dead, and spoke to the sons of Heth, saying, ⁴ '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.' ⁵ The sons of Heth answered Abraham, saying to him, ⁶ '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.' ⁷ So Abraham rose and bowed to the people of the land, the sons of Heth. ⁸ 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, ⁹ 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.' ¹⁰ 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, ¹¹ '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.' ¹² And Abraham bowed before the people of the land. ¹³ 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.' ¹⁴ Then Ephron answered Abraham, saying to him, ¹⁵ '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.' ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ 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 ¹⁸ to Abraham for a possession in the presence of the sons of Heth, before all who went in at the gate of his city. ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ So the field and the cave that is in it, were deeded over to Abraham for a burial site by the sons of Heth.

Historical and Cultural Background

- Hebron faces Mamre, a place with rich spiritual history for Abraham and Sarah. Mamre had been a special place for this couple to encounter God, and even eat a meal with God (13:18; 14:13; 18:1). Abraham had built an altar there. So Sarah died in a very holy place.
- Abraham, an immigrant and resident alien, 'ordinarily is not entitled to buy land.' (Bruce Waltke, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), p.317) So he was in a very vulnerable place needing a burial plot.
- Lots of indirect communication is happening here, in a public setting with untrustworthy people. Ephron wants to appear generous, but makes Abraham buy the whole field and not just a cave (v.11). Then he leaks a huge price into a superficial gesture of friendship (v.14 – 15).
- Four hundred shekels: Quite a large amount. Consider that a thousand years later, King David paid fifty shekels for the site of the Jerusalem Temple, including cattle for sacrifice (2 Sam 24:24). That which Ephron says is a mere 'pittance is actually a king's ransom' (Robert Alter, *Genesis*). Abraham is in no position to negotiate, because of his alien status and since he has already publicly (and in that day, legally) vowed to pay 'full price.' So what appears to be 'nothing' is in fact 'everything,' for 'this sum alone will make the difference between clinching and calling off the deal.'
- Henceforth, every Jew who came to Machpelah would be brought face to face with the testimony of Abraham's faith. Every time Abraham's burial place in mentioned in Genesis it is described as 'facing Mamre' (23:9, 17, 19; 25:9; 40:30; 50:13).

Questions

1. Notice how the narration moves from the emotions of Abraham to the negotiations he has to go through to acquire a gravesite for Sarah.
 - a. On the one hand, Abraham has learned from the almost sacrifice of Isaac that God can raise people from the dead. He believes that God will one day raise Sarah and himself and His true people from the dead.
 - b. But Abraham has been married to Sarah for about a hundred years, probably. She was his partner in faith and hope and learning about the character of God. That's a huge loss, and a lot of grieving to do.
 - c. Analogy: Many times today, a death in the family stirs up not only grief but huge troublesome details, like bringing together family members who have bad history and can't make decisions together, along with the need to buy a casket, arrange a funeral, pay for all kinds of expenses, etc. Similarly, Abraham is hit with the need to bury Sarah.
2. What is Abraham's dilemma?
 - a. He doesn't own any land on which to bury her. That's why the narrative devotes so much time to the negotiations.
 - b. Also, the setting is a challenging one for Abraham. Abraham approaches the sons of Heth by acknowledging his vulnerability: 'I am a stranger and sojourner'
3. Who are the sons of Heth? What kind of person is Ephron?
 - a. They are polite, calling Abraham a mighty prince
 - b. But they are shrewd bargainers. At first, they only offer Abraham a shelf in a cave so that Sarah's body can decompose. That's what is meant by, 'Bury your dead in the choicest of our graves; none of us will refuse you his grave for burying your dead.'
 - c. They are fine tuned to legal proceedings. Notice how many times the word 'hear' or 'hearing' happens (v.6, 11 by the sons of Heth). This is because there is no paperwork; a public community
 - d. At first he seems generous. He says, 'I give, I give, I give' (v.11). But he expands the scope from the cave to the field.
 - e. Bear in mind that Abraham is an old man, an immigrant and alien, with no legal rights, in obvious grief because of his wife's death. This is what the sons of Heth and Ephron in particular are doing.
4. How does Abraham seem to engage with them?
 - a. Carefully, and honestly
 - b. He honors them as much as he can. He pays an exorbitant fee.
 - c. He seems resigned by the end.
 - d. There is a mysterious tie in with the number 'four' here. Abraham's descendants will be in bondage for four hundred years before coming back to claim the land. Hebron might mean 'city of four' – a federation of four towns. And he has to pay four hundred shekels. There is a rather steep cost to pay because of how the world treats you because one is aligned with this God.
5. What is Abraham's goal here?
 - a. To secure a part of the land
 - b. To find a place facing Mamre. He wants Sarah's bones to overlook those holiest moments she and he had together with God.
 - c. He wants to establish a memorial for future generations.
 - i. Abraham Joshua Heschel says: 'Much of what the Bible demands can be comprised in one word: Remember.' (Abraham J. Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1951), p.61)
 - ii. How successful was Abraham in causing future generations to remember? Sarna writes: 'After the Western Wall in Jerusalem, it has remained throughout history the most sacred monument of the Jewish people.' (Sarna, as quoted by Bruce Waltke, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), p.322)
 - iii. Even well into the Christian era, this cave still speaks. The fourth century Latin poet Prudentius (ca 348-405), seized by the faith of Abraham, wrote these words:

The Tomb of Sarah

Abraham bought a field, in which to lay the bones

Of his wife, because on earth a stranger carries:
Righteousness and faith: This price for him was inexpressible,
A cave, a place of rest created to hold her holy ashes.
(Translated, from the Latin, by Steve DePangher)

- d. Illus: The earliest Christians in Rome buried their dead rather than cremated them, as a testimony that God will resurrect them.
6. In the New Testament, we are called 'aliens and pilgrims' many times. What does that mean for us in the here and now?
- a. Illus: Frodo says at the end of the LOTR, 'I set out to save the Shire, and it has been saved, but not for me.' There's a quality like that in Abraham's life and hope.
 - b. To leave pointers to a greater hope...