

## Comments on Genesis 23

This chapter bookends the subject of 21:22-34 as a clear example of Abraham behaving properly among his Gentile neighbors, after being chastened by the Lord in ch. 22 for making the Lord look no different from the heathen gods. In ch. 21, Abimelech adjures Abraham to swear with him to not deal falsely with himself or his posterity in the land he is a foreigner in. All of these are addressed in the present text, as Abraham acts exceptionally proper according to local customs to legally purchase the land from the local and take permanent ownership of the real estate in question. Note the extraordinary level of details in the text making it clear Abraham's behavior was complete proper and appropriate. Clearly, the chastening of ch. 22 has been effective. The result is Abraham is setting an exceptionally good example to the locals and to his posterity on how to behave among the Gentiles.

<sup>1</sup>And Sarah was an hundred and seven and twenty years old: these were the years of the life of Sarah. <sup>2</sup>And Sarah died in Kirjatharba; the same is Hebron in the land of Canaan: and Abraham came to mourn for Sarah, and to weep for her.

v1-2 Sarah dies, precipitating the necessity of a permanent resting place for her remains. Abraham, being a resident alien (cf. v. 4, 21:23), does not own any land and has no legal protections or rights to a burial location.

<sup>3</sup> And Abraham stood up from before his dead, and spake unto the sons of Heth, saying, <sup>4</sup> I am a stranger and a sojourner with you: give me a possession of a buryingplace with you, that I may bury my dead out of my sight. <sup>5</sup> And the children of Heth answered Abraham, saying unto him, <sup>6</sup> Hear us, my lord: thou art a mighty prince among us: in the choice of our sepulchres bury thy dead; none of us shall withhold from thee his sepulchre, but that thou mayest bury thy dead. <sup>7</sup> And Abraham stood up, and bowed himself to the people of the land, even to the children of Heth. <sup>8</sup> And he communed with them, saying, If it be your mind that I should bury my dead out of my sight; hear me, and intreat for me to Ephron the son of Zohar, <sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> 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, <sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> And Abraham bowed down himself before the people of the land. <sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> And Ephron answered Abraham, saying unto him, <sup>15</sup> 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. <sup>16</sup> 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.

v3-16 Abraham undergoes the standard legal means of approaching the locals in a public manner in order to procure the land permanently for a burial location. Abraham is cautious to decline the offer of a free burial site, in order to procure permanent legal protections according to local law.

The haggling between Abraham and Ephron is probably couched in terms that reflect legal negotiations of the time, see page 169 of Nahum Sarna's [Understanding Genesis](#) for discussion of the ancient cultural context.

v10 "Ephron the Hittite", [scholars differ](#) over whether this is "Hittite" or "Hethite" (cf. 10:5), and whether Hethites are synonymous with Hittites. For the purposes of the narrative, it is largely irrelevant whether Ephron is Hethite or Hittite. What matters is Abraham isn't one of them, and he deals with them in terms that are observed as formally legal.

v15 "four hundred shekels of silver", some scholars see this as an exorbitant price for the land, but how would you even determine what is a fair or unfair price from the given context? It is unclear how large the land parcel is, and its relative quality as far as being arable or pasturable, or being entirely rocky and otherwise useless. The presence of trees and Abraham's planting of trees suggests the land is not entirely destitute. But, regardless, all that matters in the current context is that Abraham negotiated in good faith and legally purchased the land in a manner agreeable to the seller.

<sup>17</sup> 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 <sup>18</sup> Unto Abraham for a possession in

the presence of the children of Heth, before all that went in at the gate of his city. <sup>19</sup>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. <sup>20</sup>And the field, and the cave that is therein, were made sure unto Abraham for a possession of a buryingplace by the sons of Heth.

v17-20 The financial and legal transactions are completed and Sarah is properly buried.

v18 "before all that went in at the gate of the city", in this ancient context, the city gate was the public space where commerce and legal proceedings were transacted, so public awareness and consensus was achieved.

v19 Sarah was buried there, but so was Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and their wives Rebekah and Leah.

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