

The Book of Genesis

Chapter 23

23:1-3 Sarah lived to be a hundred and twenty-seven years old. She died at Kiriath Arba [1839 B.C. when Isaac was 37 years old] (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan [Abraham had moved back to Hebron from Beersheba], and Abraham went to mourn for Sarah and to weep over her. Then Abraham rose from beside his dead wife and spoke to the Hittites [NKJ: "sons of Heth"]. He said, (NIV)

Hebron & the Hittites

Hebron was a trading outpost of the Hittite empire, which stretched into Canaan from central Turkey. This is the first mention of the Hittites being in the immediate area of Hebron. Mamre the Amorite was recorded as living there earlier. It is possible that the Hittites conquered this Amorite city due to its trading importance, which might account for Abraham leaving the area years earlier and going down into Beersheba.

23:4 "I am an alien and a stranger among you. Sell me some property for a burial site here so I can bury my dead." (NIV)

Purchasing the Field

Abraham reminded these people that he was only a temporary resident of the area, owning no real estate. His subsequent purchase of land is recorded in great detail, showing how Abraham came to legally own his first, and only, piece of land in Canaan. The symbolism here is that one day in the future, Abraham would be able to return to the land that was legally his.

In a similar example, Jeremiah bought a field while he was imprisoned—shortly before the Babylonian captivity—to express his confidence in God's promise that the people of Judah would return and take possession of the land again, at a time when God would establish an everlasting covenant with them (JER 32:6-15,40-44).

23:5-9 The Hittites replied to Abraham, "Sir, listen to us. You are a mighty prince among us [indicates Abraham was a very powerful and influential man]. Bury your dead in the choicest of our tombs [NKJ,TAN: "burial places"]. None of us will refuse you his tomb for burying your dead." Then Abraham rose and bowed down before the people of the land, the Hittites. He said to them, "If you are willing to let me bury my dead, then listen to me and intercede with Ephron son of Zohar on my behalf so he will sell me the cave of Machpelah, which belongs to him and is at the end of his field. Ask him to sell it to me for the full price as a burial site among you." (NIV)

Abraham did not want anything more than a burial place for Sarah.

23:10-11 Ephron the Hittite was sitting among his people and he replied to Abraham in the hearing of all the Hittites who had come to the gate of his city. "No, my lord," he said. "Listen to me; I give you the field, and I give you the cave that is in it. I give it to you in the presence of my people. Bury your dead." (NIV)

Ephron was not really offering this property for free. He was simply saying that he was willing to sell the cave as long as Abraham bought the field too. According to Hittite land-owning practices, if a man sold any portion of his property, he was still responsible to pay the taxes on the entire property as well as providing military service for the protection of the town. Only if he sold the whole field would his obligations of taxes and military assistance be removed. Abraham probably did not want those obligations himself, and may have been part of the reason he did not originally ask to buy all of the property.

23:12-13 Again Abraham bowed down before the people of the land and he said to Ephron in their hearing, "Listen to me, if you will. I will pay the price of the field. Accept it from me so I can bury my dead there." (NIV)

Abraham agreed to the conditions imposed by Ephron, and asked for a price.

23:14-15 Ephron answered Abraham, "Listen to me, my lord; the land is worth four hundred shekels of silver, but what is that between me and you? Bury your dead." (NIV)

Ephron asks his price in an off-handed way, which was an exorbitant amount for the property. He expected Abraham to come back with a counter-offer because haggling was always expected between a buyer and seller.

23:16 Abraham agreed to Ephron's terms and weighed out for him the price he had named in the hearing of the Hittites: four hundred shekels of silver, according to the weight current among the merchants [NKJ: "currency of the merchants"]. (NIV)

Abraham did not bargain, Sarah had been dead for some time and her body needed to be buried.

23:17-18 So Ephron's field in Machpelah near Mamre—both the field and the cave in it, and all the trees within the borders of the field—was deeded to Abraham as his property in the presence of all the Hittites who had come to the gate of the city. (NIV)

The Hittite practice required that the land contract mention the trees and their locations in order to be valid.

23:19-20 Afterward Abraham buried his wife Sarah in the cave in the field of Machpelah near Mamre (which is at Hebron) in the land of Canaan. So the field and the cave in it were deeded to Abraham by the Hittites as a burial site. (NIV)

The name Machpelah means "double" which might signify the cave had two platforms for bodies, making it a logical place to bury couples. This cave became the burial place for Sarah, Abraham, Isaac, Rebekah, Leah (49:30-31) and Jacob (50:13).