

Genesis 23 The Burial of Sarah

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Overview

The point of this chapter appears to be Abraham's desire to have some portion of the land as his sure possession. The sons of Heth offer him the use of a grave, free, but he insists on purchasing a portion of land. Though in life he may be a stranger and a sojourner (v.4), in death he and his descendants will await the resurrection in the land that God has promised them.

The chapter consists of three exchanges between Abraham and the sons of Heth, surrounded by a prologue and an epilogue.

Prologue, 1-2

127 years.—So Abraham would have been 137, and Isaac 37. Perhaps 20 years have passed since the Akedah.

Kiriatharba ... Hebron.—Ever since ch. 20, Abraham's base has been in the south, the "land of the Philistines" (21:32,33). But his earlier base was Hebron, and now we find his family returned there at the time that Sarah dies.

Moses emphasizes to us that Hebron is "in the land of Canaan," a point that he picks up at the end of the chapter as well (19). This reference ties us back to the divine promises.

- Canaan was the objective of his pilgrimage ever since his family first left Ur, 11:31.
- The name marks their first arrival: 12:5,6.
- When Lot chooses Sodom, Abraham remains in Canaan, 13:12
- This is the land that God promises him for a possession, 17:8.

Beersheba was also in Canaan, per the borders in Num 34:1-7. The point is not that he chose Hebron over Beersheba, but that he was living in Canaan, and there he wished to have the family sepulcher.

"Abraham came".—We should not infer that Abraham and Sarah were separated. This phrase probably refers to his entry to her tent for the purpose of ritual mourning, including elements described elsewhere in Scripture such as beating the chest, tearing the clothes, and putting dust and ashes on the head. Note the references in Eccl 7:2, 4; Jer 16:5 to a "house of mourning" specially designated for such rituals. Sarah did have a separate tent (24:67), as is the custom in Arab encampments.

Exchanges, 3-15

The point of these exchanges is Abraham's desire to own some portion of the land, and not just to wander in it. Abraham was a man with great "substance" or "goods" (12:5; 13:6), referring to moveable property, but God has promised him Canaan as "a possession" (17:8), that is, real estate. Repeatedly, the sons of Heth offer him the free use of one of their tombs. Persistently, he insists that he must hold title to it.

First Exchange, 3-6

There are two important contrasts in this first exchange.

Possession.—First, note that Abraham asks for a “possession,” full title to the land, while the sons of Heth offer him the use of their tombs for burial. This will develop as the point of the exchange.

Stranger, sojourner, mighty prince.—Second, contrast Abraham’s description of himself with their description of him.

- He describes himself as “a stranger and a sojourner,” referring to his nomadic status. This explains why he has no appropriate place of burial as yet.
- They recognize him as “a mighty prince,” lit. “a prince of God.” Like Abimelech in 21:22, they recognize God’s hand on him.

We should be happy if these two phrases characterized us.

- We ought to be so focused on our citizenship in heaven (Phil 3:20; cf. Col 3:1-3) that we consider ourselves strangers and sojourners on the earth.
- Our godly conduct and trust in God should commend us to those around us as under God’s special care; cf. 1 Tim. 3:7, “a good report of them which are without.”

Second Exchange, 7-11

In the second round, Abraham indicates the specific property of interest to him. The indirection of his offer (going through the people, rather than directly to Ephron) is characteristic of the East. It is also part of securing their attestation to the transaction. “Those entering the gate of the city” (v.10) is a technical term for the elders of the city.

Abraham again insists on a “possession,” v.9, and makes clear that he wants to purchase it for money, not just gain the use of it. Ephron returns to the original Hittite proposal that he give Abraham the use of it: “bury thy dead.” But this would leave Abraham still as a guest in the land, owing obligations to Ephron.

Third Exchange, 12-15

Abraham is politely persistent. With utmost courtesy, he nevertheless insists on giving money for the property, and finally Ephron accepts the deal.

Epilogue, 16-20

The epilogue consists of two paragraphs, stating two actions by Abraham. Each action is followed by a statement that Abraham now has “possession” of the tomb (17-18, 20). Finally he holds full legal title to at least some portion of the land of promise.

The first action (16) is to pay Ephron the price he has named. To those acquainted with middle eastern haggling, it is unthinkable to pay the asking price without question. But Abraham wants there to be no question that he has cheated Ephron, or that his title is in any way in question.

The second action (19) is to bury Sarah. Once again we are reminded that this property is “in the land of Canaan,” the land of promise.

Observations

Why does it matter so to Abraham to hold title to the tomb, when he himself near death at the end of a pilgrim's life? Compare Jer 32:1-15, where Jeremiah is similarly instructed to buy land in circumstances in which he will not be able to enjoy it. There, his investment is a token of his faith that God will return Israel to the land after the captivity. So here, Abraham's purchase is a sign of his faith that his descendants, after enduring another captivity, will one day own the land (15:12-16).

As at other points, Stephen's speech in Acts 7 seems to contradict this episode, for it relates that Abraham bought a tomb in Shechem (not Hebron) from the sons of Emmor (not Heth) (Acts 7:16). Jos 24:32 attributes such a purchase to Jacob, not to Abraham, and Stephen may be confused under the pressure of his speech; or it may be that Abraham indeed purchased a tomb there as well.