

GENESIS

Lesson 41

Genesis 23:1-20 — The Death of Sarah

¹ Sarah lived to be a hundred and twenty-seven years old. ² She died at Kiriath Arba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan, and Abraham went to mourn for Sarah and to weep over her.

³ Then Abraham rose from beside his dead wife and spoke to the Hittites. He said, ⁴ "I am a foreigner and stranger among you. Sell me some property for a burial site here so I can bury my dead."

⁵ The Hittites replied to Abraham, ⁶ "Sir, listen to us. You are a mighty prince among us. Bury your dead in the choicest of our tombs. None of us will refuse you his tomb for burying your dead."

⁷ Then Abraham rose and bowed down before the people of the land, the Hittites. ⁸ 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 ⁹ 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."

¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ "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."

¹² Again Abraham bowed down before the people of the land ¹³ 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."

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

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.

¹⁷ 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 ¹⁸ to Abraham as his property in the presence of all the Hittites who had come to the gate of the city. ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ So the field and the cave in it were deeded to Abraham by the Hittites as a burial site."

Genesis 23:1-20 [NIV]

For most students of the Bible, the story of Sarah's death and Abraham's mourning are well known. There are, however, a few things worth noting in this passage. First, we should note that Sarah died at what today is known as Hebron in Israel. The cave and land that Abraham purchased for her burial are there as well and have become frequently-visited sites. Known as the cave at Machpelah, tradition has it that Sarah, Abraham, Isaac, Rebecca, Jacob, and Leah are all buried in this family grave (sepulcher). Hebron itself is held as one of the four holy cities in Israel, and Islamic tradition honors it as one of their four holiest cities as well.

Second, we read that Abraham purchased the cave at Machpelah from Ephron the Hittite (Genesis 23:8). It is at this point in the narrative that critics of the Bible point to the fact that the Hittite empire did not come into being until 1700 BC; and they argue that since Abraham was born circa 2000 BC (according to the Ussher Chronology), this story cannot be anything but fiction or fable. Today, we know that Abraham was ninety-nine years old, according to the Bible, when Sodom was destroyed; and we know that it was destroyed between 1700-1650 BC, placing Abraham and the Hittites in the same time period: the Middle Bronze 2A period.

Third, when we read the story of the transaction between Abraham and Ephron the Hittite, we recognize that Abraham and Ephron are negotiating a contract for the land according to Hittite law. This means that Abraham knew their laws and the process for negotiating the purchase of the land, and it also indicates that the Hittites thought very highly of Abraham, the *habiru*.

1. How do we know the above regarding Abraham? Note what each verse below informs us about him.
 - a. Genesis 23:4

 - b. Genesis 23:6

 - c. Genesis 23:10

 - d. Genesis 23:16

 - e. Genesis 23:20

Fourth, while little is mentioned of Isaac in this passage there is something worth noting about him now as we prepare to read the next chapter.

2. How old was Isaac when his mother, Sarah, died? See Genesis 17:17, Genesis 18:10, and Genesis 23:1.

Given that marriages during this period were arranged, and we find that Isaac is still a bachelor; it comes as no surprise that following a period of mourning for the loss of Sarah, Abraham will now begin arranging for a wife for Isaac. Isaac's age, something normally overlooked in a study of Genesis, will reveal something to us about Isaac after he is married. We will be covering that in a later lesson.

Thanks for studying with us!

In Christ,

Wes