



Genesis - Chapter Twenty Three

II. Genesis 11:27-50:26 - Patriarchal History (continues)

II.a Genesis 11:27-25:18 - Abraham (continues)

Summary of Chapter Twenty Three

This chapter records the demise of Abraham's beloved wife and how he finally owns a small part of the land promised to his descendants as he negotiates the permanent purchase of a small plot of land from the Hittites. The land included a cave in which Abraham would bury Sarah.

When their own lives came to an end Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Rebekah, and Leah would be laid to rest in this cave.

II.a.xviii Genesis 23:1-20 - Sarah's Death and Burial

As the story of Abraham's life draws to a conclusion, this chapter records how Abraham buys a cave in Hebron to be a burial place for Sarah. By acquiring this plot of land, Abraham not only establishes future rights to it for his family but puts down a marker that his descendants are to be associated with the land of Canaan, as God had already promised on several occasions.

¹ Sarah lived for one hundred and twenty-seven years; this was the length of Sarah's life. ² And Sarah died at Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan; and Abraham went in to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her.

Genesis 23:1-2

Sarah lived for one hundred and twenty-seven years. Sarah is the only woman in the Bible whose age at death is recorded; it gives us some measure of how highly she is regarded in the Bible.

Kiriath-arba, which means ‘town of four’ and further elaborated on by: <<**Now the name of Hebron formerly was Kiriath-arba; this Arba was the greatest man among the Anakim. And the land had rest from war**>> (Joshua 14:15), indicates it was later known as Hebron, as does: <<**Judah went against the Canaanites who lived in Hebron (the name of Hebron was formerly Kiriath-arba; and they defeated Sheshai and Ahiman and Talmai**>> (Judges 1:10).

Abraham went in to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her. Abraham felt his loss of Sarah deeply and was not afraid to mourn publically, although he did not do so as those without hope: <<**But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope**>> (1 Thessalonians 4:13), for he knew a greater hope lie ahead: <<**But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them**>> (Hebrews 11:16).

³ Abraham rose up from beside his dead, and said to the Hittites, ⁴ ‘I am a stranger and an alien residing among you; give me property among you for a burying-place, so that I may bury my dead out of my sight.’

Genesis 23:3-4

Hittites. The designation Hittite was used in the ancient Near East to refer to at least three different groups of people. Those mentioned in Genesis are probably to be distinguished from the Hittites associated with Anatolia and Syria. Presumably Abraham addressed the leaders of the Hittites who were assembled at the gate of Hebron. The city gate was commonly the location where public decisions were formally made and transactions between individuals were ratified, refer also to Ruth 4:1-11.

I am a stranger and an alien residing among you. Abraham’s description of himself emphasises his immigrant status. Even after 62 years of semi-nomadic existence in Canaan, Abraham had no permanent location to call his own. This is all the more noteworthy in light of God’s repeated promises to Abraham that his descendants will possess all the land of Canaan. The author of Hebrews develops the idea that Abraham chose to go on living in tents because he was looking for a city ‘whose architect and builder is God’ (Hebrews 11:9-10). Moses knew the same, and commanded Israel to know it: <<**The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants**>> (Leviticus 25:23). David also knew this truth: <<**But who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able to make this freewill-offering? For all things come from you, and of your own have we given you**>> (1 Chronicles 29:14), and: <<**Hear my**

prayer, O LORD, and give ear to my cry; do not hold your peace at my tears. For I am your passing guest, an alien, like all my forebears>> (Psalm 39:12).

⁵ The Hittites answered Abraham, ⁶ ‘Hear us, my lord; you are a mighty prince among us. Bury your dead in the choicest of our burial places; none of us will withhold from you any burial ground for burying your dead.’

Genesis 23:5-6

In contrast to Abraham’s own assessment of his status, the Hittites recognise his special relationship with God and social status by according him the title **mighty prince**. Abraham was probably well known to the inhabitants of Hebron, for he had a long association with this location, refer to 13:18. Out of deep respect for Abraham, they generously offer him the use of one of **the choicest** of their own **burial places** for the final resting place for Sarah, i.e. **none of us will withhold from you any burial ground for burying your dead**.

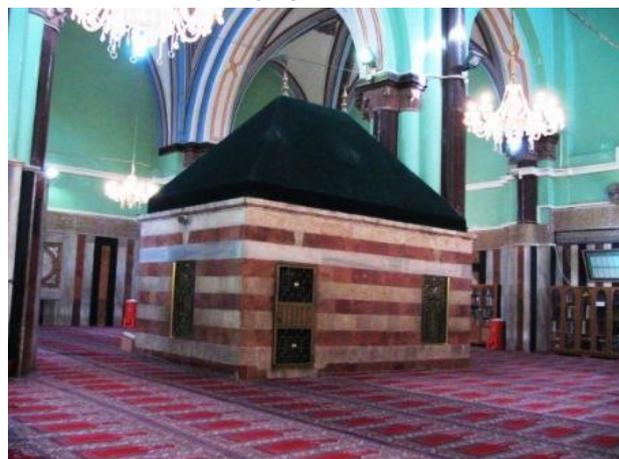
⁷ Abraham rose and bowed to the Hittites, the people of the land. ⁸ He said to them, ‘If you are willing that I should bury my dead out of my sight, hear me, and entreat for me Ephron son of Zohar, ⁹ so that he may give me the cave of Machpelah, which he owns; it is at the end of his field. For the full price let him give it to me in your presence as a possession for a burying-place.’

Genesis 23:7-9

Acknowledging their generosity, Abraham politely asks the Hittites to permit **Ephron the son of Zohar** to sell to him at full value **the cave of Machpelah** as a burial place. Although Ephron is present when these discussions take place at the city gate, Abraham first seeks permission from the Hittite population as a whole.

This may have been necessary either because Abraham himself was not a Hittite or because the transfer of property from one individual to another required the involvement of a third party. According to tradition, the cave of Machpelah is located beneath the present Mosque of Abraham in Hebron.

According to tradition, **the cave of Machpelah** is located beneath the present Mosque of Abraham in Hebron. See the image.



The Ibrahimi Mosque/Cave of Machpelah

¹⁰ Now Ephron was sitting among the Hittites; and Ephron the Hittite answered Abraham in the hearing of the Hittites, of all who went in at the gate of his city, 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 my people I give it to you; bury your dead.’ ¹² Then Abraham bowed down before the people of the land. ¹³ He said to Ephron in the hearing of the people of the land, ‘If you only will listen to me! I will give the price of the field; accept it from me, so that I may bury my dead there.’ ¹⁴ Ephron answered Abraham, ¹⁵ ‘My lord, listen to me; a piece of land worth four hundred shekels of silver – what is that between you and me? Bury your dead.’ ¹⁶ Abraham agreed with Ephron; and Abraham weighed out for Ephron the silver that he had named in the hearing of the Hittites, four hundred shekels of silver, according to the weights current among the merchants.

Genesis 23:10-16

I give you the field, and I give you the cave that is in it; in the presence of my people I give it to you; bury your dead. Although Ephron’s initial response is to offer the field and cave to Abraham for free, this may not have been his true intention, because the second time he offers it, he also casually injects what he would consider a fair price. Abraham insists that he will pay the full value of the property. This type of bartering was typical in their culture as it is in parts of the Arab world in particular today. It is important that Abraham buy the property because an actual sale ensures that Abraham has full legal title to the burial plot.

Then Abraham bowed down before the people of the land. Abraham demonstrated how any follower of God should conduct business with the world: courteously, fairly, prudently.

When Ephron sets the price at four hundred shekels of silver, Abraham willingly accepts and weighs out the amount. Since the weight of a shekel could vary, hence the comment according to the weights current among the merchants, it is impossible to be certain about the precise value of the field and cave. It is often suggested, on the basis of comparisons with 1 Kings 16:24 and Jeremiah 32:9, that this was a high price to pay, but one cannot be sure. This type of purchase contract for the cave of Machpelah was quite similar to legal texts from the period found among the Babylonians and the Anatolian Hittites.

¹⁷ So the field of Ephron in Machpelah, which was to the east of Mamre, the field with the cave that was in it and all the trees that were in the field, throughout its whole area, passed ¹⁸ to Abraham as a

possession in the presence of the Hittites, in the presence of all who went in at the gate of his city. ¹⁹ After this, Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field of Machpelah facing Mamre (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan.

Genesis 23:17-19

Mamre. In 13:18 it is recorded that Abraham settled by the Oaks of Mamre. Since one of Abram's allies was 'Mamre the Amorite' (14:13), the oaks were probably named after him.

The field with the cave passed to Abraham as a possession. This text emphasises that the property was Abraham's land by deed, not only by the promise of God. If this was the only piece of land Abraham ever owned in the land promised to him, it showed that he was a real man of faith.

²⁰ The field and the cave that is in it passed from the Hittites into Abraham's possession as a burying-place.

Genesis 23:20

For emphasis, the fact is repeated a second time in order to confirm that Abraham's purchase of the field and the cave meant that his descendants would own this land in perpetuity. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Rebekah, and Leah would later be laid to rest in this cave. This simple cave became the great tomb of the patriarchs of God's chosen people.