

GENESIS

A THEOLOGICAL COMMENTARY

THE GOD OF ABRAHAM, ISAAC AND JACOB

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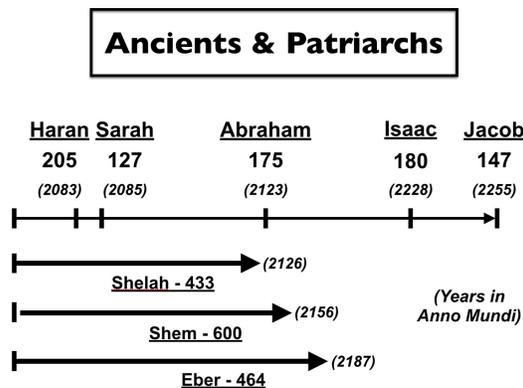
SARAH'S DEATH: THE LAND (*GENESIS 23*)

The events of Abraham's life entailed the same kinds of things that the rest of us go through: making a living, having children, occasionally having to move, relating to the neighbors, getting old, and finally death. He was not immune to the problems of life simply because he was the Heir of the Covenant.

What the Covenant did for him, however, was put a new twist to the affairs of life. As he experienced what everyone had to live through, he caught a new insight of another world, and he received a "down payment" of the eternal Inheritance, that ordinary people didn't have access to. He was a man of faith now, and his God was opening up a new world to him and to his descendants that would set them apart from everyone else – not by removing them from this world, but by blessing them in and through this world with spiritual riches.

Now it was time for Abraham to go through one of the hardest things of life, and yet in the midst of it he received the LORD's first installment on the second Promise of the Covenant: the Land.

127 years old – Sarah lived to be 127. If we put this in context of the period, she was one of the first to die at an "early" age compared to the ancients before and immediately after the Flood. Here is a timeline showing a few of the ancients and the years of the deaths of the Patriarchs, just for a comparison.



When Sarah died, Shem (the second son of Noah himself) was still living; he would live on for at least another 75 years. The great-grandson of Shem was Eber, who would outlast his great-grandfather only by 31 years.

Obviously the life spans of humanity were being drastically shortened due to the will of God, who decreed that, from the time after the Flood, people would live no longer than 120 years. (Genesis 6:3) Sarah was one of the first to experience this limitation, and her great-grandson Joseph would be the first of the Patriarchs to experience the full effects of the decree. (Genesis 50:26)

Nonetheless, Sarah had 36 years to enjoy her son Isaac after his birth. She didn't live long enough to see Isaac married, but we can assume (since it continued to be a family concern through Jacob's day) that she wanted him to find the right wife – not a Canaanite woman, but someone from back home in the family. This would also help safeguard Isaac's inheritance of the Covenant. Sarah had her own experiences with Canaanite men, and she no doubt told Abraham her feelings on what her son's future marriage plans should entail. In other words, Abraham's determination to find the right wife for Isaac was

probably as much due to Sarah's will as to his own.

Sojourners together – We have to review Sarah's life at this point. Keep in mind that whatever Abraham has gone through, Sarah has gone through the same things. As the LORD called Abraham to leave their home and travel to a foreign land, Sarah left everything behind and followed her husband. During their difficulties wandering through Canaan, she experienced her own set of problems as the matriarch of the clan, always on the move, having little to no fellowship with the surrounding pagans, following and managing the herds and property, moving to Egypt and back again. If Abraham was a "stranger and alien," so was Sarah.

Abraham of course had his own reasons for this peculiar lifestyle: God directly confronted him and spoke to him. But for Sarah, she had to take her husband's word that this was God's will for both of them. Only once do we have a record of the LORD speaking to Sarah, and even then it was in her hearing and not exactly face to face with her. (Genesis 18:9-15)

Therefore what we're looking at here in Sarah's life was what the Apostle sees in her.

For this is how the holy women who hoped in God used to adorn themselves, by submitting to their own husbands, as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord. And you are her children, if you do good and do not fear anything that is frightening. (1 Peter 3:5-6)

As Abraham obeyed God, Sarah obeyed her husband. God was giving Abraham and his Family the Covenant

that would solve the fundamental problems of the human race. So everything had to be done *right*; future generations and their spiritual well-being depended on Abraham's obedience. It was also necessary that Sarah understand the importance of this Covenant and follow her husband's lead. At key moments Sarah played her role that, ordinarily, a woman in our day would have had real problems with. But living by faith requires standing on water, and marching through the Red Sea, and surrounding Jericho, and being surrounded by a hostile army – impossible situations that require the hand of God. Sarah had her own stories to tell about this. This is not the normal life that a wife looks forward to in this world!

But she didn't give in to fear in these situations, and she passed her test of faith. So she also proved herself an Heir of the same Covenant Promises that were given to her husband. And that's the real dynamic of marriage between two believers:

Husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered. (1 Peter 3:7)

Husband and wife, when both are following the LORD, are sojourners together in the way of life. Both share in the Promises, though each may have different duties to perform. And since the husband is the leader (Genesis 3:16), the wife has to learn to submit to her husband's leading and trust in the LORD's guidance and providence, as did Sarah. And the husband, as part of his responsibilities, has to appreciate this

setting-aside of her self-will and make sure she receives her due share of the Covenant Promises. Otherwise the LORD will deny him in whatever way he denies his wife. (1 Peter 3:7) To God, it's important that *both* share in the Word of Life; the two are *one* in God's eyes. They are both heirs.

No place to bury his wife – Now we encounter the first real crisis concerning the land of Canaan – in other words, a problem with the Promise versus the reality. God had promised Abraham to give him and his descendants this land, and yet for years he was forced to wander through it as a stranger with no rights to any of it. The Canaanites weren't willing for him to settle down in their land; he was rarely in one place for long, often not even long enough to dig wells for his cattle. He had to deal with this situation by keeping on the move, providing for himself from whatever he could find along the way from Canaan all the way down to Egypt, and making treaties with the locals when possible.

But now Abraham had a problem he couldn't solve easily: he had to bury his wife's body, and that couldn't be put off. He needed some land. One option would have been to ask permission to bury the body in one of the local graveyards; but Abraham was learning too much about his God to allow that possibility. Not only was he not going to let his wife be buried among the pagans, but every crisis that came up turned into another opportunity for the LORD to keep his Covenant Promises to his heir.

So now was the time for faith, not just mourning. God had promised him this land, and the time has come to claim some of that land as a "down-payment," or "earnest," of the Promise. If Canaan

really belonged to Abraham, then surely the LORD would provide what he needed. Abraham therefore boldly went to the local rulers and requested to buy a piece of land to bury Sarah's body. And they agreed.

The Hittites – These people were one of the eleven tribes descended from Canaan, the son of Ham and the grandson of Noah. (Genesis 10:15-18)

There has been some confusion about these particular Hittites and the later empire of the Hittites; the ones mentioned in this chapter were living along the mountain range of Canaan around Hebron and were only one of the Canaanite tribes. Later, however, the empire would be centered more in Syria and especially modern-day Turkey, extending south from there into Canaan and east into Mesopotamia.

What concerns us, however, is that there would be a "legal memory" at work here between the Hittites and Abraham's descendants. What Ephron sold to Abraham and sealed with a deed would of course be respected in future generations – or at least it should have been. As the Israelites came back home 400 years later, they laid claim to their rightful property and the Hittites of all people should have had no problem with that. In effect, then, the descendants of Abraham later made good on their legal claim to the same people who sold the property to Abraham.

When God finally brought Israel out to Egypt into the Promised Land, the formula that was used over and over to describe the local tribes included the Hittites ("the Canaanites, *the Hittites*, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites"), since they were at the height of their power at the time and of course had to be dealt with. They

naturally contested Israel's claim as much as their neighbors, in spite of their former friendly attitude to the forefather of Israel; but since they too shared in the Canaanite immorality and idolatry they also had to be destroyed.

Mighty Prince – The Hebrew original here reads “a prince of God in our midst.” It seems as though God had gone before Abraham to prepare for this personal crisis of his. The Hittites' compliment of him was not without reason: by now they had seen Abraham grow prosperous and strong among them. They saw him in the beginning as simply a wandering stranger; they watched him defeat five kings (who in their turn were ravaging the local tribes) and rescue his nephew Lot; they watched Abraham not only survive the famine in Canaan that everyone else suffered under but also come back from Egypt rich and self-sufficient, independent of the Canaanites and their resources. The Hittites heard about, and witnessed for themselves, the LORD's power in protecting Abraham and his wife from royal sexual predators.

This was quite a reputation for one man. And we have to keep in mind that it's because of Abraham's God that he achieved all these things: a man of his age, in a foreign land surrounded by enemies and strangers, with nobody on his side – and yet successful in all that he did.

But we also have to remind ourselves what it was that Abraham had set his heart on: it was the Covenant Promises that God had given him. These were not the ordinary things that worshipers of false gods had in mind – family, long life, food and drink, land, power, health, entertainment. The God of Abraham has totally different treasures in mind for his

people – spiritual treasures – and Abraham saw them.

You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. (1 Peter 2:9-10)

And since Abraham had this high calling on his life, he stood out from the crowd in other ways as well: “Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable.” (1 Peter 2:11-12) So we're about to watch an heir of God do business with the people of the world: honorable, high principles, treating others with respect, putting things of this world in their proper place *under* the higher calling of God's chosen people. We have needs in this world, but the point is not to amass physical treasures but Heavenly ones. That will be clear to see among the people we deal with.

Notice that Abraham treated the Hittites with respect and *asked* for their help (he could have simply taken what he wanted from them and started a war – without consulting God about it first!). He described himself as “an alien and a stranger” among them; he “bowed down” to them; he insisted that Ephron set his own price on the land. With his conduct “above reproach,” the Hittites had nothing to fault him for. Plus, Abraham left the door open for God to guide events, not himself. Here was a man who was better than them – a

follower of the LORD. He knew his God would take care of him.

The Cave at Machpelah – Ephron’s cave was near the city of Hebron; it’s still there, right in the middle of the modern city. (The Muslims own the cave now, and they limit its access pretty much to those of their own faith.)

Abraham wanted to buy not only the cave but also the entire field that contained the cave. This made sense because he was planning not only for a place to bury his dead but to provide a family graveyard for his future descendants to use as well. They couldn’t be expected to be continually going into and out of a cemetery that sat in the middle of someone else’s property; the family had to have reasonable access to their own graves. As it turned out, the Israelites would indeed be using this same field on numerous occasions to bury members of the family; his foresight made sure that the cemetery stayed safe, easily identified, and legally restricted to the family’s use, in the eyes of the community even when other surrounding boundaries changed over time, as they always do in a community. There was never any question of rights when the Israelites showed up from time to time for a funeral (as did Joseph and the Egyptians for Jacob’s burial.)

Bargaining for the land – No doubt this unusual exchange between Ephron and Abraham was typical of the culture of that day. But in two respects we can understand why they “circled around each other” in this way. *First*, many other cultures use the same approach to making a deal. I’ve seen country people, in particular, do the same thing when making a deal. One person acts as if he has no intention of taking any money

from the other person, that it would be beneath him to take money for what he’s offering (particularly if others are watching!), and yet he secretly hopes that he *does* get money for it, in fact he would be insulted if the other person took his words at face value and took it for free. It’s a peculiar ceremony that people go through to save face, to make a good impression, and yet profit in the end. In other words, the man is going to get a fair price in spite of his performance. No doubt 400 shekels was a fair price for the land in everyone’s eyes.

Second, they were being polite and respectful of each other. Ephron, in light of Abraham’s reputation, was being careful with this man who had brought down two kings. At least *he* was being paid for this land; Pharaoh had to give wealth and riches to Abraham to get rid of him, and Abimelech (just right down the road) had to do the same thing.

Abraham, for his part, was showing his character by keeping peace with the locals and dealing with them fairly. He wanted no local memories left behind of suspicions of cheating or unfair trading. “For an overseer, as God’s steward, must be above reproach.” (Titus 1:7) Remember that he had already told the king of Sodom the same thing: “I have lifted my hand to the LORD, God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth, that I would not take a thread or a sandal strap or anything that is yours, lest you should say, ‘I have made Abram rich.’” (Genesis 14:22-23)

The Deed – Here is the centerpiece of the story. For the first time Abraham now has a legal right to part of the Promised Land. The deed was proof of ownership.

Abraham was now a landowner in Canaan, for the first time in thirty years. Not that he wanted to do it this way, or that this is the kind of beginning he wanted, but it will have far-reaching results for his Family.

On the surface, this story looks like a simple affair: Abraham needs a place to bury his wife Sarah. But there are some clues lurking here underneath the surface that alert us to more important issues at stake. For some reason Abraham is being careful about acquiring this plot of land. And we mustn't forget that the Covenant Promises were always uppermost in his mind; he knows that the LORD had plans not just for himself but long-range for his descendants down through history. All this puts depth to the picture.

In order to appreciate that depth, let's ask some pertinent questions. The answers to these questions may appear to be obvious, but perhaps not. There's a Chinese proverb that goes, "Someone who asks a question is a fool for five minutes; someone who doesn't ask a question is a fool for the rest of his life." The question is, did Abraham have an ulterior motive for his bargaining for this piece of land?

- *Why didn't Abraham just bury Sarah out in the desert?* Because the Promise stated that the Family of Abraham was entitled to the Land. To be buried out in the desert would be to relegate Sarah to anonymity, with no record of her life, with no land of her own even for a grave.
- *Why did Abraham call himself a "stranger and alien" to the Hittites?* Because he refused to be one with them. He wanted it very plain up front that he didn't want to

be part of their community, not even when it came to burying his dead. Somehow he wanted to work this out so that he could remain separate from them.

- *Why did Abraham make this burial of his wife such a public thing?* Because he wanted witnesses. He's about to do something that would help establish his own Family in the land, and since he couldn't trust the locals to be faithful in their dealings with him (given their false gods and terrible morals) he had to create a "courthouse record" kind of situation that nobody could contest. He's about to do something out of the ordinary and he wants everyone to see it.
- *Why did they call him a "prince of God in the midst of us"?* That's what the Hebrew phrase says literally. They knew that Abraham had a divine presence behind him, enabling him and protecting him. Whether they liked him or not (they probably didn't), they had a great deal of respect for him. They will do what they can to accommodate him to avoid any trouble.
- *Why did Abraham stress having property "as a burial site among you"?* Notice that the Canaanites never sold Abraham any fields for grain or grazing his livestock; they had always insisted he keep moving as a "stranger and alien." Note how he introduced his request – "If you are willing that I should bury my dead out of my sight ..." But when he asked for a burial site – *that* they would agree to. There would be nobody living there, it would be deserted almost all the time, and it would be safer having Abraham's

dead relatives in their midst than living legends. The irony is that this was Abraham's idea: "For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life." (2 Corinthians 2:15-16) It's as if Abraham was saying, "To you people I'm dead – I'm dead to your world, to your ways, to your empty way of life. That's the only presence I want in your midst, and the only thing you can expect from me."

- *Why did Abraham turn down "the choicest of their tombs"?* Because he didn't want Sarah in the Hittite funerary register. She wasn't part of their community but one of the Heirs of the Covenant. The Hittite tombs will disappear over time: "As smoke is driven away, so you shall drive them away; as wax melts before fire, so the wicked shall perish before God!" (Psalms 68:2) In contrast, the hand of God has preserved the Family registry for thousands of years, and Sarah has an eternal and honored place in that Family.
- *Why did Abraham want Ephron's field?* At first he didn't ask for the field – only the cave of Machpelah "at the end of the field." It was Ephron's idea for him to buy the field as well. No doubt Ephron felt that the cave would have brought a poor price by itself.
- *Why did Abraham insist on buying the field?* Here is the crux of the matter. Our questions have been leading us toward a concept that is inescapable: Abraham insisted on

buying this field because he didn't want his wife's body to be given over and get lost among the pagans. His wife is destined for *the Promised Land*, not the land of the Canaanites. By buying the field, the land becomes his own – the first payment of the LORD's Promise to him that he and his Family would own the entire land of Canaan. So the Heir of the Covenant is making sure his wife is buried in the Promised Land, not in the world of the wicked.

He is also making sure that the rest of his descendants would end up in the Promised Land. His son, grandson, and their wives were all transported to this field at their deaths. The heirs of Abraham were not to be left among the spiritually dead, but taken to "sleep" in their new home until the resurrection. So he is identifying himself and his Family with the new home that God is giving them – not this world, but the world to come. Right now all he can procure is a single field; but at least the address out by the road will read, "The Promised Land."

And the *Heir* of the Covenant makes sure that it happens – he is the only one who is able, indeed responsible, to put his wife into the Promised Land. And it's his *wife* whom he puts there. And he *buys* the field.

There are so many fundamental concepts involved in this transaction that we as Christians have seen re-enacted in the ministry of Christ. The great Heir of Abraham has bought with his own blood a place in the new world for his Bride, the Church. When we die in him, we

don't actually "die" but sleep – until that day when we will wake up in newness of life in the Promised Land of Heaven. "And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. And you know the way to where I am going." (John 14:3-4) Here's the Husband taking care of his Bride – making sure she ends up in his world, in his inheritance, not in this world.

- *Why did Abraham make certain of the ownership?* It was for the same reason we go to the courthouse and make our land purchases legal. With a deed in hand, and eyewitnesses, then nobody can successfully lay claim to the land we purchased or force us to use it for their ends. The Hittites would no longer have the right to this piece of land. Their presence there was forbidden by law. He didn't want his wife's body to end up in Hittite hands.

What we have to see here is that this is God's doing: Abraham was quite properly waiting on God to provide the Promise in his own way. Well, he did – he did it through Sarah's death – but it was a real transaction that put down stakes on the Covenant. And because God did it (and not Abraham), it would grow into an important element of Abraham's life and the lives of his descendants.

The Canaanites, of course, didn't see what was coming. To them a cemetery was hardly a promising start for one's posterity. They fully intended to hold on

to the rest of their property, even if Abraham had thoughts otherwise. Abraham might be a landowner now, but he and his Family were to be minor players in the community for centuries; they were, in fact, gone for most of that time. What the pagans didn't count on, though, was the faithfulness of Abraham's God to keep his Promise of giving the entire land to his heirs. God put down his surveyor's stakes for the Nation of Israel back in Genesis 13; here Abraham puts down the boundary stakes for the first piece of that land. One day his Family would come back and, starting with that solitary cemetery, take possession of the entire land of Canaan.

Enlarge the place of your tent, and let the curtains of your habitations be stretched out; do not hold back; lengthen your cords and strengthen your stakes. For you will spread abroad to the right and to the left, and your offspring will possess the nations and will people the desolate cities. (Isaiah 54:2-3)

So here was the beginning of the second Promise of the Covenant made with Abraham.

A burial place for Abraham's family – This piece of land stayed in the family for the next 400 years – until the Israelites came back from Egypt and reclaimed it.

In fact all of the Patriarchs were buried there, along with three of the wives. We are clearly told this in the story of Jacob giving instructions to his sons to bury his body in this family cemetery "back home" in Canaan.

I am to be gathered to my people; bury me with my fathers in the cave that is in the field of

Ephron the Hittite, in the cave that is in the field at Machpelah, to the east of Mamre, in the land of Canaan, which Abraham bought with the field from Ephron the Hittite to possess as a burying place. There they buried Abraham and Sarah his wife. There they buried Isaac and Rebekah his wife, and there I buried Leah — the field and the cave that is in it were bought from the Hittites. (Genesis 49:29-32)

Over the years, each of the Patriarchs came and went to the cemetery to bury their dead. There were 300 years of stories and traditions surrounding that piece of land – special men and women who were following the LORD, learning faith, training their children to pass on the Covenant inheritance, leaving memories of their stay among the Canaanites. The cemetery turned into a memorial, so to speak, of what God had done with the Patriarchs of Israel. It was in fact a testimony in stone to the faithfulness of God. It represented God's faithfulness to that Covenant while the

Family was away until such time as they would come back home and claim the fulfillment of the entire Covenant.

And when the Israelites came back, what would they be starting out with? Some graves, the dead, a piece of land surrounding a cemetery, only a memorial? No. That's not how the God of Israel works. That cemetery represented a Promise that God would forever remember and, eventually, against all appearances, faithfully keep. It was a visible guarantee, the first parcel of the entire land of Canaan. It was only a foothold, but it was *their* land.

The Point – The “down payment” to Abraham for the second promise – the Land – seemed a somber way of rewarding the Patriarch for his faithfulness. It was not, I am sure, the kind of thing he was looking for.

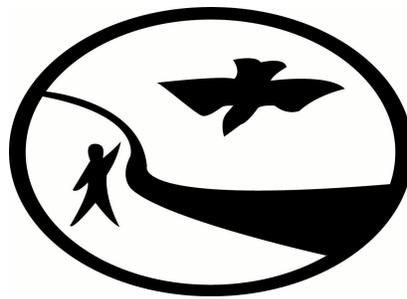
But the Heir of the Covenant was making sure that his wife would end up in the Promised Land, not among the Hittites. Abraham and his Family don't belong in this world, they belong in the next world.

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Genesis : A Theological Commentary

ISBN 978-1547101634



Ravenbrook Publishers

A subsidiary of
Shenandoah Bible Ministries

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