

Genesis 22:20-23:20  
Psalm 47  
Acts 7

“The Firstfruits of the Land”

August 16, 2009

God promised in Genesis 17 that he would give to Abraham the land of Canaan  
as an everlasting possession,  
literally, “a possession forever.”  
And now Abraham purchases a property for a burial place,  
literally, “a possession for burying.”

I thought about titling this sermon “Life from the Dead, Part 3,”  
because quite frankly, that’s what this is about.

Think about it:

Abraham saw how God has brought life from Sarah’s dead womb (ch 21)  
Abraham believed that God would raise up Isaac from the dead (ch 22)  
And now Abraham wants a place to bury his dead.

God has said that Abraham’s seed will possess the whole land.  
And the first piece of land that Abraham possesses is a place for burial.

Why is this important?

Sing Psalm 47  
Read Acts 7

I’d like to clear up something that some of you may have noticed in the readings.

Stephen says that the burial place was bought from “the sons of Hamor in Shechem.”  
Genesis says that the burial place was bought from “Ephron the Hittite...east of Mamre,”  
which is identified with Hebron.

Shechem is north of Jerusalem, near Mt Ebal and Mt Gerizim.  
Hebron is south of Jerusalem.

There are two episodes that are being conflated here.  
Abraham bought the burial place from Ephron the Hittite.  
In Genesis 33:18-19 Jacob buys a piece of land  
from the sons of Hamor in Shechem.  
Jacob will be buried in Abraham’s tomb in Hebron.  
But Joseph will be buried at Shechem.

Stephen summarizes this rather quickly and winds up blending the two stories.  
Technically it was Jacob who paid the sons of Hamor in Shechem,  
but since Jacob was the seed of Abraham,

it is true enough that Abraham bought the land.

I bring this up because some people try to use these sorts of passages  
to cast doubt on the accuracy and veracity of the Scriptures.  
Too often people talk about the biblical authors  
as though they were trained in post-Enlightenment historical methods!

When we talk about the inerrancy of scripture,  
we are not saying that the biblical authors wrote history  
according to the standards of 19<sup>th</sup>-century rationalists!  
Rather, we are saying that the biblical authors are inerrant  
according to the standards of ancient history writing.

Conflating two events and narrating them together is not a problem.  
It is simply a shorthand that none of Stephen's hearers or Luke's readers  
would have been surprised at or bothered by.

We are coming to the conclusion of the Generations of Terah (11:27-25:11).

Genesis 23-25 closes the narrative of the life of Abraham,  
by giving us the genealogy of Rebekah,  
the death of Sarah,  
the marriage of Isaac,  
the genealogy of Abraham's other sons through Keturah,  
and finally the death of Abraham.

Sarah dies at the age of 127 (the only woman whose age at death is given in the OT).  
She was 65 when she Haran and followed her husband to a foreign country.  
She lived for 62 years as a sojourner in several places:  
in the first ten years she lived in Shechem, Bethel, Egypt, the Negeb,  
Bethel (again), and Hebron (see Gen 16:3 for the time reference).

Then she lived in Hebron for the next 18 years –  
but then they left again and lived in Gerar for a few months  
before settling in Beersheba.  
At some point in the next 30 years they returned to Hebron, where she died.

But after all her 62 years of living in the promised land,  
it is only in her death that she finally gains permanence.

In the pastoral notes this week  
I made reference to this in terms of the transience of modern society,  
and indeed to part of the calling of our congregation  
as a church in a university town.  
Part of our calling as a church is to provide a home –  
to be a family to university students who are “passing through.”

But I would like to call your attention to another aspect of Abraham and Sarah's "pilgrimage."  
Yes, they were sojourners and aliens.  
Yes, they were pilgrims.

But for around 50 of those 62 years they lived in Hebron and Beersheba.  
As we see in our narrative today,  
Abraham has become a respected part of the community.  
He is not a "nomad,"  
forever wandering in the land.  
He is a pilgrim.

But he is a stationary pilgrim!

What makes Abraham a pilgrim is that he resolutely refuses to "join" the Canaanites.  
He is looking for a heavenly country.  
He is looking for a city with foundations.  
He is looking for the inheritance that God has promised –  
and will not settle for "the best" that this age offers.

And so we say, with the early Fathers,  
that for us, every homeland is a foreign land –  
and every foreign land is a homeland.

We do not think that "transience" is a good thing in itself.  
There is also something good about being rooted –  
so long as our roots are in Christ!  
Which is exactly what we see in Abraham.

We learn from the end of chapter 22 that Abraham continued to stay in touch with his family –  
albeit in those days perhaps only occasionally!

### **Introducing Rebekah... (22:20-24)**

*20 Now after these things it was told to Abraham,*

*"Behold, Milcah also has borne children to your brother Nahor:*

*21 Uz his firstborn, Buz his brother, Kemuel the father of Aram,*

*22 Chesed, Hazo, Pildash, Jidlaph, and Bethuel."*

*23 (Bethuel fathered Rebekah.)*

*These eight Milcah bore to Nahor, Abraham's brother.*

*24 Moreover, his concubine, whose name was Reumah,  
bore Tebah, Gaham, Tahash, and Maacah.*

Verse 23 makes it clear that a major purpose of this genealogy  
is to connect Rebekah to the Abrahamic line.

But there is more going on here.

Nahor has 12 sons.

Ishmael will have 12 sons.  
Jacob will have 12 sons.

These relatives of Abraham are not among the chosen people,  
but they will play various roles in Israel's future.

### **1. The Death of Sarah in the Land of Canaan (23:1-2)**

*23:1 Sarah lived 127 years; these were the years of the life of Sarah.*

*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.*

The death of Sarah is related fairly quickly.

But the text notes that she died in the land of Canaan.

This is an important point in Genesis.

Abraham and Sarah,  
Isaac and Rebekah  
and Leah

will die and be buried in the land.

Jacob will die in Egypt –

but he made his sons bring him back to the land  
in order to bury him in the tomb of Abraham.

All the Patriarchs and Matriarchs are buried in the land.

This forms a special contrast with Moses and those who came out of Egypt.

Because of their rebellion and lack of faith,

the wilderness generation never enters the land –  
and even Moses dies outside the land –  
and no one knows where his grave is.

There is something special about dying and being buried in the land.

Genesis 23 is loaded with the words of death and burial:

The word for “my dead” (which means Sarah) occurs 8 times.

The root meaning “bury” or “tomb” occurs 13 times.

### **2. Sarah among the Hittites? (23:3-9)**

*3 And Abraham rose up from before his dead and said to the Hittites,*

*4 “I am a sojourner and foreigner among you;  
give me property among you for a burying place,  
that I may bury my dead out of my sight.”*

In order to understand this scene you need to understand ancient economic practices.

As a sojourner and foreigner, Abraham is not entitled to buy property.

After all, anything he purchases will be alienated from the Hittites forever.

Will they be willing to give Abraham a toehold in their land?

And the response of the Hittites indicates that they do not want to do this!  
They will give Abraham the right to bury in any tomb.  
But they will not give “property for burial.”  
They will give a “tomb”  
but not a “possession for a tomb.”

*5 The Hittites answered Abraham,*

*6 “Hear us, my lord; you are a prince of God among us.*

*Bury your dead in the choicest of our tombs.*

*None of us will withhold from you his tomb to hinder you from burying your dead.”*

The Hittites have learned that those who bless Abraham are blessed.

Those who curse Abraham are cursed.

Therefore they do not call him a stranger and alien!

They do not consider him the lowliest of the lowly – a sojourner!

Instead they call him a “prince of God.”

You are a prince among us.

Bury your dead in one of our tombs!

Abraham asks for a permanent possession.

Instead they offer him a glorious title: “prince of God,”  
and a place of honor in their midst.

Will Abraham be satisfied with Hittite titles and honor?

Will status and prestige be tempting to Abraham the sojourner?

Long before Jesus was offered the kingdoms of the world,  
if he would only bow to Satan,

his father Abraham was tempted by the titles and honors of the nations!

But Abraham remembered the promise of God.

God had said that his seed would possess the lands of the Hittites.

And so Abraham declines the titles and honors of the Hittites.

He wants a piece of land to bury his dead.

He wants a place where he and his wife can rest through the coming centuries  
until his descendents inherit the land.

But why does it matter?

If his descendents will inherit the land,  
why not accept burial in a Hittite tomb?

After all, if the point is to be buried in the land,  
why does it matter who owns the tomb?

Today we would say, “Bury her in a Hittite tomb!”

But then again, many Christians today do not seem to see the importance of burial,  
as is evidenced in the rise of cremation.

Abraham is looking for the resurrection of the body.

I don’t know how much Abraham consciously understood.

But Abraham will not bury Sarah among the Hittites.

Her future is glorious.

God has brought life from her dead womb.

And Abraham believes (in some way) that God will bring life to her dead body.

To understand what Abraham is doing,

we need to remember that when Israel comes into the promised Land,

they will bring the final judgment of God upon the Canaanites and Hittites.

Abraham will not dishonor Sarah’s body

by burying it with those who will be destroyed in the final judgment.

If we believe in the resurrection of the body,

if we believe that God will raise up *this* body –

if, with Paul, we are willing to call the resurrection of the body,

“the adoption as sons – the redemption of our bodies” (Rom 8:23),

then we should treat *our* dead like Abraham treated *his* dead.

Notice how Abraham proceeds:

*7 Abraham rose and bowed to the Hittites, the people of the land.*

They just called him “prince of God” –

and yet he humbles himself before them.

Why?

Because he knows that what he is about to do

he is pushing the envelope!

When a prince of God bows before you, you know that he is trying to get something!

*8 And 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 the son of Zohar,*

*9 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 property for a burying place.”*

Abraham knows full well what he is asking.

He is asking Ephron to alienate a portion of his land.

The idea of “full price” has nothing to do with “fair price” –

but rather has the idea of an irrevocable sale.

Abraham does not want any strings attached.

He wants to walk away with full title to this “property for burying.”

### **3. The Firstfruits of the Land (23:10-16)**

*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 sight of the sons of my people I give it to you. Bury your dead.”*

Now we are told where we are.  
We are in the city gate.  
We are in the place where transactions occur,  
where all the elders of the city are present.

Abraham has negotiated skillfully and wisely.  
Ephron could have denied a sojourner and alien easily!  
But he cannot refuse a “prince of God.”

But Ephron does not want to alienate his property.  
And so he enters the negotiation with a seemingly generous offer.  
He says, “Oh no, my lord, I could not ask for money.  
I give you the field and the cave.  
Bury your dead!”

What happens if Abraham accepts this?  
Abraham will be indebted to Ephron.  
He will have burial rights,  
but the title to the property would still be ambiguous.

But Abraham wants the clear title to the land.

*12 Then Abraham bowed down before the people of the land.*

Abraham humbles himself once again.  
The prince of God bows before the people of the land,  
and speaks one more time.

*13 And he said to Ephron in the hearing of the people of the land,  
“But if you will, hear me: I give the price of the field.  
Accept it from me, that I may bury my dead there.”*

Abraham has backed Ephron into a corner.  
Abraham will not accept anything less than a final transaction.

But this also means that Abraham has backed himself into a corner.  
Ephron can name his price, and Abraham will be forced to pay it.

What should we say of Ephron the Hittite?  
Should we remember him as the one who ripped Abraham off?

No, we should remember Ephron the Hittite as the one who blessed Abraham  
by allowing him to purchase the firstfruits of the inheritance.  
And in turn, Ephron himself was blessed –  
at the very least with an extra 400 shekels of silver!  
but hopefully with much more.

*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 listened to 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.*

We don't have enough information about ancient land transactions  
to say for certain how this relates to the “market value” of the day,  
but several hundred years later, David will buy the temple site for 50 shekels.

Ephron is probably expecting Abraham to haggle and bargain –  
as every middle easterner would do!

But Abraham does not.

Why not?

If Abraham tries to haggle,

Ephron may wiggle out of it.

Ephron has offered him clear title to a piece of the Promised Land.

400 shekels (perhaps 100 pounds) of silver is nothing compared to that.

As Jesus says, when a merchant finds a treasure in a field,  
he will sell all that he has in order to purchase that field.

Abraham knows that there is a treasure in this field –

because to be buried in the land is to look forward to the resurrection!

And so Abraham pays.

As John Chrysostom put it,

“In the hope of things to come...he overlooked present realities,  
and, in the expectation of greater things, he set less store by those of this life....

So what excuse will we have, tell me,

who despite such wonderful promises and guarantees of ineffable blessings

hanker for present realities, buying up property,

ever concerned for our image,

amassing all these possessions out of greed and avarice...?” (p118)

Jesus says that if we sell our goods and give to the poor,  
then we lay up for ourselves treasures in heaven.



What matters more to us?

Amassing “stuff” in this age?  
Or seeking first the kingdom of God?

And remember what we have seen about seeking first the kingdom of God already:  
it means showing hospitality (love to strangers) – which can be expensive!  
it means Abraham praying for Abimelech’s women to give birth,  
when Abraham’s own wife was barren;  
Seeking first the kingdom of God means living as a pilgrim and sojourner,  
even when your neighbors call you a prince of God!

In short it means being buried in the Land.

#### **4. The Burial of Sarah in the Land of Canaan (23:17-20)**

*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, was made over to Abraham as a possession  
in the presence of the Hittites, before 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 east of Mamre  
(that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan.  
20 The field and the cave that is in it were made over to Abraham  
as property for a burying place by the Hittites.*

Notice how emphatic Genesis is about where Sarah was buried.

She was buried in the cave of the field of Machpelah east of Mamre –  
that is, Hebron – in the land of Canaan.  
She was buried in the Promised Land.  
She was buried in the land of life and blessing.

If you would live, then it matters where you are buried.

You must be buried with Christ by baptism into his death.

If you have been united with Christ through baptism into his death,  
then sin and death no longer have dominion over you,  
because you share in the resurrection life of our Lord Jesus Christ!

After all, Paul says in Romans 6:3-4,

“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized in Christ Jesus  
were baptized into his death?  
We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death,  
in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father,  
we too might walk in newness of life.”