

Abraham & Sarah: Strangers and Exiles

Abraham and Sarah went through so much together as husband and wife, with their shared faith in God. Their love for each other was evident in their lives and Abraham's love for Sarah continued after she died.

In Genesis 23 we read of Abraham's grief and the remarkable process by



which he acquired a burial site for his wife. How striking it is, that even though they had such a huge role to play in the purpose of God, Abraham did not own any land where he could bury his own wife. As the New Testament comments, Abraham and Sarah considered that they were *'strangers and exiles on the earth'* (Hebrews 11:13). They were looking forward to the time when God would grant them entrance into the *'city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God'* (Hebrews 11:10).

Burying the Dead

The chapter in Genesis opens with the sad record of faithful Sarah's death:

Sarah lived one hundred and twenty-seven years; these were the years of the life of Sarah. So Sarah died in Kirjath Arba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan, and Abraham came to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her (Genesis 23:1-2).

Sarah is the only woman in the Bible of whom it is recorded how old she was when she died. At the very least this shows how Sarah was held in such high honour during her faithful life, and this esteem is carried into the Bible record.

Abraham was understandably distraught over her death as he mourned and wept for her. It was imperative that he made appropriate arrangements for his beloved wife's burial.

Abraham stood up from before his dead, and spoke to the sons of Heth, saying, "I am a foreigner and a visitor among you. Give me property for a burial place among you, that I may bury my dead out of my sight" (v3-4).

Abraham was in the vicinity of the Hittites (or 'sons of Heth'), a point heavily emphasized in the text. For example, the Hittites are referred to as 'the people of the land' in verses 7 and 12, and consider how much the words are used here:

Now Ephron dwelt among the sons of Heth; and Ephron the Hittite answered Abraham in the presence of the sons of Heth, all who entered at the gate of his city... (v10).

Why should there be so much emphasis placed on the fact that Abraham was seeking to purchase a burial place from the Hittites?

Promised by God

The Hittites are mentioned earlier on in Genesis in connection with the promise God made to Abraham:

On the same day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying: "To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates — the Kenites, the Kenezites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites" (Genesis 15:18–21).

The land which was promised to Abraham's descendants was occupied at the time of Abraham by many different peoples – such as the Hittites!

In light of this knowledge, Abraham's method of purchasing a burial place for Sarah takes on greater significance. For instance, Abraham could have approached the situation by demanding that the Hittites give him a burial place. He could have said something like, "The Most High God has promised this land to my descendants – you are going to be thrown out of it anyway so give me it now so I can bury my wife!" This is not how the man of faith conducted himself at all.

Respectful Negotiations

As mentioned above, instead of forcibly stating his right to the land, Abraham described himself to the Hittites as being a 'a foreigner and a visitor' (23v4); in addition, he was so

respectful towards them that it is recorded twice that Abraham 'bowed before the people of the land' (verses 7 and 12). The Hittites reciprocated this respect for Abraham as they called him 'Lord' (verses 6, 11 and 15) and a 'mighty prince' or 'prince of God' (verse 6, depending on which version you read).

They were very willing to agree to Abraham's request for Sarah's burial place:

Bury your dead in the choicest of our burial places. None of us will withhold from you his burial place (23:6).



When we read verses 8–16 we see that Abraham had identified the cave of Machpelah, on the land of Ephron the son of Zohar, as the right place to bury Sarah. Ephron was more than happy to give Abraham the cave free of charge:

No, my lord, hear me: I give you the field and the cave that is in it; I give it to you in the presence of the sons of my people. I give it to you. Bury your dead (v11).

However, Abraham honourably insisted that he pay the full price. He was keen to respect the customs of the people of the land, a point that one commentary expands upon for us:

'The mention of the trees [verse 17], the weighing of the silver by current standards [verse 16], the proclamation in the presence of witnesses at the city gate [verse 18]... conforms in detail to Hittite law' (P. Alexander and D. Alexander, The Lion Handbook to the Bible (Oxford, 2009), p. 139).

This is helpful to us in at least two ways. Firstly, it provides evidence that the Bible is historically reliable. If the record in Genesis 23 was fictional, then the details would almost certainly not correspond to Hittite law. Secondly, it strengthens the main point that has been made – Abraham respected the customs of the Hittites.

Faithful Living Today

Are there any practical points which can be taken away from reading about Abraham's interaction with the Hittites?

We live in a world where fewer and fewer people believe in the only true God, which can make developing faith challenging. It may even be that we face mockery or aggression because we respect God and His Word.

However, like Abraham, we should endeavour to *'live at peace with all men' (Romans 12:18)*. We should also respect the laws and customs of the place where we live, so long as they do



not conflict with God's word or our individual consciences.

Sometimes preaching the gospel does offend people such as the Pharisees in Jesus' day, as reported in Matthew 15:12). But Christ never taught that his followers should go out of their way to offend people, and some of his early followers were actually well-liked members of society:

So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved (Acts 2:46-47).

Abraham and Sarah were described as showing faith in God, aspiring to be in His kingdom more than wanting the benefits of this life. There is a good pattern to follow, one which leads to an important relationship with God. We read:

God is not ashamed to be called their God (Hebrews 11:16).

Stephen Blake