

Parashat Chayei Sarah חיי שרה

Torah: Genesis 23:1–25:18

Haftarah: 1 Kings 1:1–31

Abraham Looking Ahead

General Overview

Do you ever wonder what it must have been like to be Abraham, especially in his old age? To be sure, we know that he was a man who loved and trusted God more than anything else. We also know that he practised typical ancient Near Eastern hospitality. He had servants, possessions, and he loved his family. That much and a little more perhaps, is clear from the parashiyot that we have studied. But what sort of personal characteristics did he have? What kind of man was he? Was he kind? Gentle? Quiet? Talkative?

In reality, the Torah actually tells us very little about Abraham's personal characteristics. In this, the last parasha dealing with Abraham, we will observe a very definite characteristic of his. Abraham had the ability to look ahead and plan for the future. He did not just put the promises of God into a scrapbook to be looked at every so often. He deeply cherished those gifts that the Lord had given him to such an extent that he spent his life protecting them and doing his part to work for their fulfilment.

That, in essence, is the main thrust of this week's parasha.

Exposition

We shall examine the plans that Abraham made for the continuance of the covenant using this outline

- I. Abraham Purchased Land
- II. Abraham Procures a Wife
- III. The Aftermath

In this excerpt from Parashat Chayei Sarah, we will focus on the first section, Abraham Purchased Land.

I. Abraham Purchased Land

Why did the Torah record the story of the burial of Sarah? What importance does it have in the flow of biblical history?

A. A Grieving Husband

This parasha contains the first mention of the burial of the dead in the Bible. Because of this, many of the rules concerning forms of burial and the mourning period are derived from the details in this passage.¹

The text tells us that Abraham came to mourn for Sarah and to weep over her (23:2). The word translated "mourn" is from the Hebrew root *s-ph-d* (ס-פ-ד), which means, "to wail or lament."² The Hebrew word translated "weep" or "bewail" simply means "to cry," especially in grief.³ It has always been the custom of

people in the Near East to freely show emotions, especially those associated with grieving.

There is, however, a little peculiarity in the kind of weeping that Abraham did. The word for cry is *l'vkotah* (לבכותה). In the Masoretic Text (MT, the standard Hebrew text), the כ is written smaller than the other letters. According to Eli Munk,

This seems to point to a certain constraint in Abraham's expression of grief. Indeed, "for the righteous person, convinced of the immortality of the soul, death means only a temporary separation and he does not give way to excessive sadness."⁴

This comment is very consistent with those made by Paul. He taught that death for believers in Messiah is different than death for everyone else. He wrote, "Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope" (1 Thessalonians 4:13).

If Munk is correct in his analysis of the MT peculiarity, then we see our father Abraham grieving, but with a grief tempered by a confident assurance (the biblical definition of hope) that he will see his beloved wife again.

As important as it is to see how one of our spiritual forefathers expressed his grief, we do not believe that that constitutes the only reason this story is recorded for us in the Torah. It seems that another purpose for its insertion into the text is to provide a document for Abraham's descendants to use as a legal claim on, at least, part of the land of Promise. How is this?

Even though the Lord gave the land of Canaan as a gift, part of the actualisation of receiving that gift was purchasing parts of it. That is what we find here in this parasha. Abraham purchased a piece of land from Ephron of the children of Heth. Most biblical scholars say that the children of Heth were the Hittites, an ethnic group originating in the north, in modern-day Turkey. How could Abraham inherit land that was owned by the Hittites and not the Canaanites?

The answer lies in Genesis 10:15 which indicates that Heth was one of the sons of Canaan. Hence, the Hittites were, in reality, a Canaanite group, although they mainly lived north of what is usually referred to as the land of Canaan and did not speak the language of the Canaanites.

The Hittites, as a group, invaded the heartland of Canaan sometime after 1400 BCE, but there were also sporadic Hittite settlements scattered throughout Canaan before that time. In fact, Ezekiel 16:3 informs us that Jerusalem was partially of Hittite origin when it says, "your [Jerusalem] father was an Amorite and your mother was a Hittite." The Amorites were western Semites, who are Canaanites who spoke the western branch of the Semitic language. The Canaanites were not Semites, but they spoke a Semitic language similar to Hebrew. (Are you confused yet!?)

Chapter 23, therefore, affords us a glimpse into ancient Hittite land transactions. The whole chapter seems to reflect the Hittite laws current in Patriarchal times, though it must be added that these were not unique; various Babylonian parallels to them can be deduced.⁵

We can find one example of these Hittite customs in verses 9 and 11. Abraham asked for only the cave as a tomb, but Ephron wanted him to have the adjoining field as well. Kidner says,

In Hittite law to buy a man's whole property was to incur his feudal obligations; hence Ephron might be manoeuvring here towards selling him the whole, rather than the part he requested in verse 9.⁶

Another example, cited by Kidner is the reference to trees in verse 17. Doing so was "characteristic of Hittite land transactions, which were careful to specify them."⁷

At the outset, it seemed that Ephron merely wanted to give the land and cave to Abraham. Do not be deceived by this apparent altruism! It was just part of the Near Eastern bargaining process. However, Abraham was not in the mood or position to bargain. He had some good reasons to purchase this land, and very little time for quibbling over the price. Moreover, if he had merely received the land as a gift, his ownership could be subject to question in a future generation. Accordingly, he entered into a valid and legal land transaction involving money and witnesses. Thus, we see that Abraham had the foresight to make sure that this land was forever legally his property and that of his descendants.

There are two other significant land purchases attested to by the Scriptures: The tomb of Joseph, acquired in Shechem, and David's site of the temple. These three acquisitions were all purchased without bargaining and paid for with unquestioningly legal tender. They are unchangeable Jewish possessions of the land of Promise.⁸

B. "The Town of Four"

The specific site, which Abraham purchased as a tomb for Sarah, is called the Cave of Machpelah. It is located in Hebron, which is also called Kiryat Arba. The designation of Hebron as Kiryat Arba can be understood in several ways. Historically, it is called "The Town of Arba" because Caleb conquered it from a man named Arba, "the father of three big men" (Joshua 15:13). However, "Kiryat Arba" also literally means, "the town of four." Why "four"? The Midrash Rabbah supplies us with some possible answers. It is interesting enough for it to be quoted at length:

It had four names: Eschol, Mamre, Kiryat Arba, and Hebron. Why was it called Kiryat Arba? Because four righteous men dwelt in it: Amer, Eschol, Mamre, and Abraham. Again, four righteous men were buried therein: Adam, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Four patriarchs were buried therein: Eve, Sarah, Rebekah, and Leah. Or, on account of its masters, who were four: Anak, and his three sons...Because there went forth Abraham, who pursued four kings, each a mighty ruler. Further, because it fell to the lot of four: first to Judah, then to Caleb, afterwards to the priests, and finally to the Levites. And it is one of the paltriest places in Eretz Yisrael. The four are the following: R. Isaac said, "Dor, Nofet Dor, Timnat Serah, and Hebron." The Rabbi said, "They were Dannah, Kiryat Sannah, Timnat Serah, and Hebron."⁹

C. A Legal Jewish Claim

We cannot resist, at this point, making an appropriate application in light of the present situation in the land of Israel. There are others who claim ownership to

all three of the places mentioned above which have been rightfully purchased for the Jewish people: the cave of Machpelah in Hebron, Joseph's tomb in Shechem, and the Temple Mount. The Scripture provides ample legal evidence about the Jewish claim for these locations and their environs; but there are those who wish to deny Israel of its rightful ownership and occupation of these locations. In light of this, perhaps a major reason the Lord had this detailed information about the purchase of these locations recorded in the Tanakh is to provide the world with a witness and testimony that these places, as well as the rest of the Holy Land, are the national inheritance of the Jewish people.

Hats off to our father Abraham who, although he was in dire grief over the loss of his dear wife Sarah, nonetheless, had the foresight to purchase the land in Kiryat Arba for his people as a lasting legal inheritance.

¹ Elie Munk, *The Call of the Torah: Genesis*, 303.

² Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 704.

³ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁴ Munk, *op. cit.*, 302.

⁵ Derek Kidner, *Genesis (TOTC)*, 146.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 146.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *The ArtScroll Chumash*, 109.

⁹ Genesis Rabbah 58.4