

Abraham said: I am an Alien Among You, Sell Me Some Property So I Can Bury My Dead

23: 3-18

DIG: What was significant about Abraham burying Sarah in Canaan, rather than taking her back to their homeland? Why might this property be an important part of God's plan for Avraham (see 25:7-11)? What relationship do you see between the *purchased land* and the *Promised Land* (see 22:15-18)? Why was Abraham willing to bury his wife in Canaan but does not allow his son to find a wife there (23:3)?

REFLECT: Can the Hittites where you live and work tell there is something different about you? Do they call you a mighty prince/princess, or something else? Are you blameless in your dealings with others?

It is not surprising that the acquisition of land is one of the most significant aspects of the covenant agreement. Abraham appears content enough to wait for **the land** to come to him in **the LORD's** timing, but meanwhile, **the dead** must be laid to rest.³⁷³ Here we have the negotiations and the purchase of **the cave of Machpelah**. Because **she** was not yet buried, Abraham rose from beside his dead wife and spoke to the Hittites. As an alien and a stranger, Avraham presented his request in the most courteous manner. ADONAI had given Abraham the whole land of Canaan as an everlasting possession, to him and his descendants (17:8). So when he asked: **Sell me some property for a burial site here so I can bury my dead (23:3-4)**, he knew that it would also be used for future generations of his family. This starts an interesting account of the Oriental method of bargaining.

The Hittites replied to him, **"Sir, listen to us, because you are God's mighty prince, or God's elect one, among us, go ahead and bury your dead in the choicest of our tombs. Choose anyone that you want; none of us will refuse you his tomb for burying your dead" (23:5-6)**. This was the start of the bargaining process. They politely offered **the land** to Abraham for free, but the expectation was that **he** would refuse and offer payment.

Then Avraham, following strict middle-eastern social customs, **rose and bowed down before the people of the land, the Hittites (23:7)**. Abraham's goal was to be blameless in this transaction. For ADONAI, God is a sun and shield; ADONAI bestows favor and honor; no good thing does He withhold from those whose walk is blameless (Ps 84:11). God despises those who minimize the value of a thing during negotiation and say: **It's no good; it's no good, and then boast of the bargain after the deal is done (Proverbs 20:14)**.

Abraham knew the sight he wanted, a field containing a suitable cave with trees around it, and within sight of their home in Mamre. It belonged to a prominent Hittite named Ephron. In accordance with the exaggerated formalities of purchasing and selling that have long been practiced in the East, Avraham first asked for someone to mediate between him and Ephron, to transmit his request to be allowed to purchase the land.³⁷⁴ He said to them: If you are willing to let me bury my dead, then listen to me and intercede with Ephron son of Zohar on my behalf (23:8). So he will sell me the cave of Machpelah, which is Hebrew, meaning a double cave, which belongs to him and is at the end of his field. Ask him to sell it to me for the full price as a burial site among you (23:9). Abraham does not go directly to Ephron, but he gets some of the Hittites to plead for him. No business of any importance can to this day be transacted in the East without middlemen.³⁷⁵

Ephron the Hittite was sitting among his people, indicating a position of authority. And he replied to Abraham in the hearing of all the Hittites who had come as witnesses to the gate of his city, where all transactions were legalized (23:10).

Ephron said to Avraham, "No, my lord. Listen to me; I give you the field, and I give you the cave that is in it." Abraham didn't need the field, but under Hittite law, if Ephron only sold him the cave, the Hittite would still have to pay labor services to the king. But if he sold the field and the cave, he would be free from those services. Therefore, Ephron said: I give both the cave and the field to you in the presence of my people. Bury your dead (23:11). Here then, we have what appears to be a free offer of the burial site, but it was not to be taken seriously. That was the way things were done in ancient Middle East negotiations. Abraham understood this was just a polite way of starting the negotiations. Then we have Abraham's counter offer.

Again, following the custom, Abraham bowed down on his knees until his head touched the ground before the people of the land (23:12). Then the offer itself is given. And he said to Ephron in the hearing of the witnesses: Listen to me, if you will. I will pay the price of the field. Accept it from me so I can bury my dead there (23:13).

Ephron answered Avraham, and cleverly gave his asking price: Listen to me, my lord; the land is worth four hundred shekels of silver (which would be about ten pounds of silver). Then he flippantly adds: But what is that between me and you? This implies that this would be a reasonable asking price. Bury your dead (23:14-15). But in fact, this was a highly inflated price because the average cost then was four shekels of silver per acre. At this price Abraham would be paying forty shekels of silver per acre. A laborer, who would earn ten shekels per year for his work, would not expect to make that amount in his lifetime!

But once again, this was all part of the negotiations. The first offer was supposed to be a deliberately high price, and then you begin negotiating downward. So at first **he** offers **the land** for free, then **he** offers it at a deliberately high price. The negotiations were then supposed to begin in earnest. But, opposed to all custom, **Abraham** pulls a surprise!

Abraham immediately *agreed* to **Ephron's terms** (no doubt surprising **Ephron** and all the Hittites) and weighed out for him the price he had named in the hearing of the Hittite witnesses: **four hundred shekels of silver, according to the standard of value current among the merchants** at that time (23:16). Nothing was written down. It was an oral contract completed in the hearing of the Hittite witnesses. This was done according to Hittite law codes.

So Ephron's field in Machpelah near Mamre - both the field and the cave in it, and all the trees within the borders of the field - was deeded to Avraham as his property in the presence of all the Hittite witnesses who had come to the gate of the city (23:17-18). All the details of the oral contract are given and this is still customary in an Oriental bargain.