

## Lesson 13 – A Real Estate Transaction

### Genesis 23:1-20

<sup>1</sup>Sarah lived 127 years; these were the years of the life of Sarah. <sup>2</sup>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.

<sup>3</sup>And Abraham rose up from before his dead and said to the Hittites, <sup>4</sup>"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."

<sup>5</sup>The Hittites answered Abraham, <sup>6</sup>"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."

<sup>7</sup>Abraham rose and bowed to the Hittites, the people of the land. <sup>8</sup>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, <sup>9</sup>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."

<sup>10</sup>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, <sup>11</sup>"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."

<sup>12</sup>Then Abraham bowed down before the people of the land. <sup>13</sup>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."

<sup>14</sup>Ephron answered Abraham, <sup>15</sup>"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."

<sup>16</sup>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. <sup>17</sup>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 <sup>18</sup>to Abraham as a possession in the presence of the Hittites, before all who went in at the gate of his city. <sup>19</sup>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. <sup>20</sup> The field and the cave that is in it were made over to Abraham as property for a burying place by the Hittites.

## Synopsis

Isaac is now 37 years old and it has been approximately 20 years since he and Abraham sacrificed the ram on the altar at Mt. Moriah. His mother, Sarah, was 127 years old when God took her home to be with him. That would make Abraham 137 years old. And, since Abraham was a sojourner (resident alien) in Canaan, living among the Hittites, he owned no land. Therefore, he went to the gate of the city (where all official business was transacted) and asked the residents of Kiriath-arba (Hebron) if he could purchase a burial place for Sarah. Having lived near Abraham for years, the people of Kiriath-arba knew what a godly man he was and offered him any plot of land that he choose in which to bury Sarah.

Abraham had already scouted out the area and knew which plot of land he wanted. He responded right away that he would like to purchase the cave of Machpelah, currently owned by Ephron the son of Zohar. He offered to pay the full price of the cave. Ephron was among those at the gate when Abraham made his announcement and his response to Abraham was immediate and firm. Announcing to all the people around, he proclaimed that he would freely give the cave to Abraham and he also included the field in front of it. Abraham, however, was not willing to take it without paying for it, so Ephron said that it was worth 400 shekels of silver, but repeated that he did not need to be paid for it. Nonetheless, Abraham weighed out the price of the land and the cave and purchased it as a burial place for Sarah.

### **Genesis 23:1, 2**

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

Sarah is the only woman in Scripture whose age, death, and burial are mentioned.

“Sarah lived 127 years” – At her death, Abraham was 137 years old and Isaac was thirty-seven years old.

“Kiriath Arba” – The name means “the city of Arba.” Arba, according to [Joshua 15:13](#) and [Joshua 21:11](#), was the father of Anak. Also, according to [Joshua 14:15](#), Arba was the greatest man among the Anakim (the family of Anak, including his father). From [Numbers 13:33](#) we learn a little more about the Anakim:

And there we saw the Nephilim (the sons of Anak, who come from the Nephilim), and we seemed to ourselves like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them. ([Numbers 13:33](#))

In Genesis chapter six we are told where these giants came from:

The Nephilim were on the earth in those days, and also afterward, when the sons of God came in to the daughters of man and they bore children to them. These were the mighty men who were of old, the men of renown. ([Genesis 6:4](#))

The name of the city during the lifetime of Abraham was probably not Kiriath Arba. The book of Genesis was written by Moses during the time of the Exodus (four hundred years after Abraham). The name of the city at the time that Moses wrote the book was Kiriath Arba, so that is the name that Moses used.

“Abraham went in to mourn for Sarah” – In **Genesis 22:19** we were told that Abraham lived at Beersheba (the well of seven or the well of an oath). Some have deduced from the current verse that Abraham was living there while Sarah lived at the Oaks of Mamre (Hebron) and that he came from there when she died. There is nothing in Scripture or any extra-biblical writing which indicates this. It is more likely that Abraham was out in the field with his flocks or herds at the time of Sarah’s death and it is from out in the field that “Abraham came to mourn for Sarah.”

### **Genesis 23:3, 4**

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

“Then Abraham rose up from before his dead” – After mourning for Sarah, Abraham rose and went to the city nearby. From verse ten we can deduce that this transaction occurred in the gate of the city. The gate is where the leaders of a city gathered to have discussions and to transact business.

“the Hittites” – The Hittites were also known as the sons of Heth. According to **Genesis 10:15**, Heth was one of the sons of Canaan. The Hittites were one of the major tribal families occupying Canaan at the time of Abraham.

“foreigner” – Hebrew *geyr*, meaning “a guest.” Everyone knew that Abraham was not a Canaanite, he was a foreigner. Because of this, he had no legal possession of the land, even though God had already given it all to him.

“a sojourner” – Hebrew *toshawb*, meaning “a dweller.” Today we would call him “a resident alien.” Because of this, he was in need of a burial place for Sarah. Had he simply been a traveler, he would not have been expected to bury his dead wife here, but in his native land. But, because he was a resident, this is where he must bury her.

Notice that Abraham claims no greatness for himself. He could have announced himself as a wealthy, or a mighty, prince, which he was and which everyone knew. Instead, he humbled himself before the rightful residents of the land.

“Give” – There is a difference of opinion as to whether Abraham was asking for a gift or proposing a purchase. However, he makes it abundantly clear in the course of this transaction that he was not expecting to receive it for free, but that he was expecting to pay for it.

### **Genesis 23:5, 6**

**The Hittites answered Abraham, "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."**

“prince of God” – Hebrew *nasiy elohim*. The word *nasiy* implies “an exalted one,” that is, a king, a prince, or a sheik. The word *elohim*, although most often translated as God, literally refers to “a powerful one.” Some translations have this as “mighty prince,” which is a valid translation of these two words, although it is more likely that they were calling him “a prince of God.” Obviously, the people of this city held an extremely elevated opinion of Abraham and they were very likely aware of his relationship with Yahweh. To them he was not merely a stranger wandering through their land.

They all recognized that he was a person of great faith, wealth, and power and they obviously had great respect for him.

“bury your dead in the choicest of our tombs” – In response to Abraham’s request for a burial place for Sarah, the Hittites offered him whatever burial place that he thought was the best. Nothing was held back. Notice that not only did they offer him the best, but they left it up to Abraham to decide which he thought was the best.

### **Genesis 23:7-9**

**Abraham rose and bowed to the Hittites, the people of the land. 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, 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 rose” – It was proper for Abraham to have been seated during the initial discussion of his acquisition of a burial place for Sarah. Although he may have been among the richest and most respected person at the meeting, he nonetheless stood up and bowed himself in the presence of the Hittites as a sign of respect.

“If you are willing that I should bury my dead out of my sight” – The language used here is one of great respect between Abraham and the Hittites.

“entreat for me Ephron the son of Zohar” – Apparently, Abraham was not aware that Ephron was present during this discussion, but he was aware that Ephron was the owner of the cave that he wanted as a burial place for Sarah.

“For the full price let him give it to me” – Here is the indication that Abraham was not expecting a gift, rather he was asking to have the cave in exchange for the full value of its worth.

### **Genesis 23:10, 11**

**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, "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."**

“was sitting” – Hebrew *yashab*, meaning “to sit.” This same word is used to indicate habitation or dwelling, but the root idea is that of sitting, so this is a proper and acceptable translation. It appears from this that Ephron was present at the gate of the city while Abraham and the leaders of the city were having this discussion. This is further indicated by the fact that he answered Abraham directly.

“his city” – Some have speculated that Ephron was the ruler of the city because of this expression. However, we have no other evidence of this.

“I give you the field, and I give you the cave” – Although Abraham clearly offered to pay full price for the cave, Ephron offered it to Abraham as a gift. Notice that he states three times that he is willing to “give” the property to Abraham. There is speculation that Ephron was actually expecting a generous gift from Abraham in spite of the fact that he offered to give it to him, but that is only speculation. Notice also that Abraham only asked for the cave at the end of the field, but Ephron offered the cave and the field together.

### **Genesis 23:12, 13**

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

“I give the price of the field” – Although Ephron offered to give the land and the cave to him, Abraham insisted on paying for it.

“price” – Hebrew *kehsef*, meaning “silver.” This seems to have been the legal tender of the land of Canaan in Abraham’s time.

### **Genesis 23:14, 15**

**Ephron answered Abraham, "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."**

“a piece of land worth four hundred shekels of silver” – In response to Abraham’s offer to pay for the land, Ephron quotes him a price for the land. Although later in the history of the Israelites, a shekel was a coin designation, here it appears to be a weight designation since there is no evidence that coins existed at this point in history. It is difficult to determine the equivalent value in today’s currency, but four hundred shekels of silver in Abraham’s day may equate to between \$20,000 and \$50,000 today.

“what is that between you and me?” – This is an indication that Ephron considered the value of the land and the cave as insignificant to both Abraham and himself. He apparently considered the exchange of silver for the land as more of a nuisance than a necessity.

### **Genesis 23:16-20**

**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. 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. 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. The field and the cave that is in it were made over to Abraham as property for a burying place by the Hittites.**

“Abraham listened to Ephron, and Abraham weighed out for Ephron the silver” – Notice that there was no negotiation on the price. Either the price quoted by Ephron was a reasonable price or (if it was excessive) Abraham was willing to pay even an excessive price. The wisdom of this action is seen in the fact that if nothing was given for the land, a descendant of Ephron could later claim that Abraham stole the land. This way there was no question that it was a fair and agreed on exchange.

“made over” – Hebrew *qum*, meaning “to rise” or “to stand.” Several derivative meanings of this word include “to validate,” “to strengthen,” “to obligate,” or “to ratify.” The act of rising up in the presence of witnesses at the end of the transaction was all that was needed to ratify the transaction and make it complete.

## So What?

### Buying and Selling The Old Fashioned Way

Here we see the first documented business transaction in the Bible. It is a transaction where ownership of land is transferred from one person to another in exchange for something of value (silver). What makes this transaction so noticeable is the manner in which each of the parties approached it. Unlike today, there was no bickering and bartering where each party tried to get the most for himself while giving the least to the other party. Instead, there appears to have been an attempt by both parties to out-give the other. It starts off with Abraham stating his need to bury Sarah's body and his desire to purchase a place to do so. The response of the local residents was that Abraham could have any place he wanted. The implication is that he could choose the location and have it for free, no matter who it belonged to.

Apparently, Abraham had given some previous thought to where he might bury his wife, for he did not seem to hesitate in identifying the location and its current owner. Although he knew who the owner was, he apparently did not know the owner. He asked the leaders of the city to intervene on his behalf with Ephron, the son of Zohar, asking him to sell the land to Abraham for its full price.

At that point, Ephron stood up and said, "Sir, take both the field and the cave. I give them to you! Let these people be witnesses, take them. They're yours. Bury your wife's body."

Abraham then bowed before Ephron and the others and said, "You are so kind to offer me your land as a gift, but I insist on paying for it with silver."

Ephron, recognizing Abraham's generosity, responded by stating what he perceived to be the value of the land and then added: "Sir the value of the land is but a trifle between you and me. Don't bother with any payment, just take it."

However Abraham was determined to give fair compensation for the land and proceeded to count out the amount of money declared by Ephron. He could have said, "Oh, come on, Ephron! It's a small field and all I really want is the cave. However, if you insist on including the field in the deal, I'll give you this amount, and not one shekel more. That's my final offer. Take it or leave it!" But that's not how Abraham acted. He wasn't trying to get it at the lowest possible price. He was willing to pay the full asking price, even if it had been more than the land was worth.

- How would you characterize Abraham's attitude and actions in this transaction?
- Is it possible to enter into a business transaction today with the same approach taken by Abraham and Ephron?
- What would happen if we did?

It seems to me that the transaction between Abraham and Ephron is characterized by humility, trust, fairness, and a desire to give more than one receives. Abraham needed a place to bury Sarah's body so he humbly approached the Hittites. They were willing to let Abraham choose the best of the land. Ephron was willing to just give to Abraham the land that he had chosen, but Abraham wanted to give full value for it. Ephron quoted a price and Abraham immediately paid full price. Done deal! No contract was signed.

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