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The Family of Abraham: Part 13—The Death of Sarah

March 25, 2019



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Today, I comment on Genesis 22:20—23:20, concerning the death and burial of Sarah.

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Transcript

Welcome back to this, the 13th in my series on the story of Abraham. We've arrived at chapter 23, but before we get into that, I would like us to take a few steps back and consider the story of chapter 22 just a little bit at the end. There's a concluding set of details that we didn't talk about last time.

Now, we've looked at the story of Abraham as a series of tests in part, and the very first test is his call from Ur of the Chaldees. He has to leave his father's house, he has to leave his homeland, and he has to go to a land that the Lord will show him. And the final great test is the test where he has to sacrifice his only son.

Lot has left, Ishmael has left, Eliezer of Damascus is not going to be his heir, and now he has to give up Isaac, his only son. And this great test is one that is the sacrifice—if the first one is the sacrifice of his past, this is the sacrifice of his future. There's no way back from this.

All laughter will die within the house of Abraham beneath his sacrificial knife. If this action is carried out, there's no way back. Can you imagine Sarah recovering from this? Can you imagine his relationship with God being in any way positive after this? What sort of status would he have as a spiritual leader after this point? All of these things would be devastated if he sacrificed Isaac, but yet he goes ahead with that action, and God intervenes at the last moment.

But there is this radical test. Will Abraham give up his future for God in the same way as God called him to give up his past? And throughout this story, we need to see just how horrific and vertiginous the vision is that Abraham is living out. If this is not the true God, then his actions are at best mad and at worst monstrous.

You go through the story of Abraham, and you'll see the things that he does, leaving everything behind him—all his father's house, all his connections, all his family origins—and then going out to a land that God is going to show him. He's also going to sacrifice his only son. It's a monstrous act.

Under no circumstances, it would seem, this act could be countenanced, but yet he's about to commit it. If this were not the one true God that he was serving, it would be the most terrible of things to do. And so this helps us to see, on the one hand, radical loyalty, but also the terror and the horror of the possibility of idolatry.

If this is not the true God, then what he is doing is worse than monstrous. It's the most brutal and devastating act he could permit. And that sense of walking on a tightrope, this sense of looking down and just seeing this vast gulf beneath you, should be some of our experience of reading these passages.

That we realize that if this is not the true God, what is Abraham doing? This is terrifying. Now, in the context of this, Abraham arrives back at Beersheba and he receives news that his brother has had children through his niece, Milka. Now, what is the reason why this is given to us at this point, this particular detail? He's told this, and it's connected with the events that have preceded, the events of the binding of Isaac.

The events of the binding of Isaac lead to a blessing upon Abraham, a blessing that he will be multiplied, his descendants as the stars of heaven, sand on the seashore, and they shall possess the gates of their enemies again. It's a ramping up. It's mentioned dust of the earth before, it's mentioned stars in heaven.

Now it's mentioning sand on the seashore. It's kind of extending towards the sea, extending outwards, extending upwards, and now possessing the gates of their enemies. At each stage it's going out.

But you hear the news of Milka and Nahor having children, and that is significant here because at the very outset of the story, the story begins with the three lines of Terah.

Terah has three sons, Haran, Nahor, and Abraham. Haran dies early in the land of Ur of the Chaldees.

Then they move to Haran, this name spelled slightly differently, but they settle there, and Abraham and Nahor take wives for themselves. Nahor takes Milka, the daughter of the dead brother Haran, and Abraham takes Sarai. I've suggested the possibility that Sarai is Isca, the other daughter of Haran.

So what you have in this case would be Abraham and Sarai have raised a son, a son has been gotten to them, for in some ways raising up the name of the dead brother. And also Nahor and Milka have had sons likewise. And so the line of Nahor has been preserved.

This is a fulfillment of the original events that set things in motion. The call of God and the death of the older brother. And that's a possibility.

The other thing to notice is that this is the line of the family that leads to Rebekah. That you read here, And Bethuel begot Rebekah in verse 23. So it's important to set up the background for who will be the wife of Isaac.

And in the wife of Isaac you're bringing together the two halves of the two families, the two lines of the family that preserve the line of the dead brother. Both Isaac and Rebekah are children that represent the line of Haran. And that is something worth noting.

Another thing about this is that they have 12 children, 12 sons. And that would be something that is connected with the story of Isaac. Ultimately Isaac will extend into Jacob and the 12 tribes.

So you have Haz, Buz, Kemuel, Hesed, Hazo, Pildash, Jidlat, and Bethuel. And then you have Tiber, Gaham, Thahash, and Makkah. And that's 12.

And then you also have the daughter, Rebekah, which would connect with Dinar. So 12 sons and one daughter. And as you read this you should also notice that Abraham only has one son.

Whereas the line of his brother is multiplying. It seems that the line that is not directly the bearer of the covenant is multiplying. Whereas the covenant line is just... I mean they've only got one son to their name.

They have Ishmael but Ishmael's left. Ishmael's off the scene. Lot is no longer associated with them.

And so it would seem that the non-promised seed is multiplying at a far greater pace than the promised seed. At the beginning of chapter 23 we read of the death of Sarah. Now is the death of Sarah associated with the events that proceed? The events of the

binding of Isaac? Some have suggested it is.

It's a long tradition that Sarah's death in some way was associated with the news of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. Now that's a possibility. And the fact that it occurs at this point might suggest some sort of connection.

It's worth thinking about just how devastating this event would be for Sarah. Now we focus very much upon Abraham's sacrifice. But if Abraham, without telling Sarah he leaves early in the morning, takes their son, the son of her old age, the son of her laughter, and kills him.

I mean how does she come back from that? There's no way back from that. There's no way to relate to her husband after that. It's a devastating event.

And so something about this news maybe has something to do with what happened, the fact that Sarah dies at this point. We don't know but it's worth considering. And there's something tragic that she dies at this point perhaps.

That it's connected with the news of the near death or maybe mishearing about the death, what she supposes to be the death of her son. She dies at the age of 127. Any significance to this number? Well, it's the seventh centred hexagonal number.

Maybe there's something to that. Particularly since she gave birth to Isaac at the age of 91, which would be the sixth centred hexagonal number. Maybe there's something to it.

I think there are also possible connections with the story of Esther. If you look through the story of Esther, the story is introduced to us with a reference to 127 provinces in verse 1 of chapter 1. Later on in chapter 8 verse 9 we read of the king's scribes and their sending messages to 127 provinces. In verse 30 of chapter 9 you have 127 provinces again mentioned.

Now, why could there be a connection here? Well, if you look at the story of Sarah and if you look at the story of Esther there are all sorts of parallels. So maybe this is just a detail that tips us off to the connection. That the number is maybe associated with some sort of perfection as the seventh centred hexagonal number.

Possibly. I wouldn't put much weight on that. But it might also be something that tips us off to the fact that Sarah and Esther are connected figures.

Why would they mention the number of the provinces on three separate occasions? It just seems over the top. It seems to be indulging in details that just aren't necessary. But yet, look at the lives of Sarah and Esther.

Both of them are taken by a king on account of their beauty, taken into the royal hurry. Both have to hide their identities in the king's palace. In both cases there is a threat to

the seed.

Both are taken into, you could argue that both are taken into a fraternal relative's care. Mordecai takes Esther in, adopts Esther after the death of her father. And her father is either his uncle or some have argued his brother, the Vulgate.

And I think the Septuagint has that as well as the reading. But that would be an even closer connection with, possible connection with Sarah. But in both of these cases we see a lot of similarities that might spring to mind.

Both of them have to hide an identity. Both of them end up, and in the story of Esther we see a far more active deliverance of her people. There are also many connections between the story of Esther and the stories of the Old Testament, particularly Genesis.

The story of Esau and Jacob is playing out there. And the relationship between Haman, the son of Agag, the descendant of Agag. And ultimately the descendant of the Amalekites who are the descendants of Esau.

And the line of Jacob. So there's a rivalry there. There's also relationships between Judah and Benjamin that are playing out.

The relationship between Esther, who's of the tribe of Benjamin, and her interceding for the Jews, which would be particularly associated with the tribe of Judah. We also have Joseph connections in the story of Mordecai. Many of the ways in which Mordecai is raised up and all these other details are similar to the story of Joseph.

I won't get into those here. I might mention them at some point in the future. But that reference to Sarah being 127 years old and the details within the story of Esther might suggest that there's something more than meets the eye.

That there's some connection that we're supposed to see between these two stories. And that if we read the story of Esther, we might have some light shed back upon the story of Sarah. Likewise, if we read the story of the Shunammite woman, the woman whose son dies and she protests to the man of the Lord that this child was a promised child.

And that this is a cruelty that should not be accepted. That it's just for God to give her back the child. Again, that can help us to read the story of Sarah in relationship to the story of the binding of Isaac.

All of these stories, as they are juxtaposed with each other, as they relate to each other, as they are read in parallel with each other, give us a deeper reading of the text. Help us to see things that we might otherwise have missed. Now at this point, Abraham is still living within the land of Philistia.

He is concerned within the context of finding a place within the land to bury Sarah. And

so he goes, Sarah dies in the land of Canaan in Hebron. And Abraham comes to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her, which suggests the possibility that he wasn't actually with her when she dies.

For some reason, they were apart from each other. Maybe he was working with his flock somewhere. Maybe he was traveling or doing some sort of business.

Maybe it was when he was returning from the binding of Isaac. Or maybe they were alienated from each other after that event. We don't know.

But it's worth considering the different places that people are at in these stories. Because there are surprises there. That Sarah is in Hebron rather than in Beersheba.

That Isaac comes from Beelahel Roy in the story of the next chapter. These are not where we expect them to be. And the fact that people are not living together, it doesn't seem that they're all in the same place, maybe suggests some sort of tensions within the family.

We don't know. And maybe we shouldn't speculate too far. But we should just register those details and think about them.

Is there anything more going on there? There is a concern to bury his dead within the land. Now, he hasn't yet received the land. He's living outside the land still.

And he wants to have some sort of foothold in the land. This is a sort of down payment, a sense that he will have some place within the land that will be a sort of guarantee of the future inheritance. And the fact that people are buried there is, there's a sense of resurrection theme.

Of a resurrection theme. Later on in the story of Jacob, Jacob will ask to be buried within this territory. As he's buried within the land, there's the recognition that they truly belong there.

And that one day God will act and that will be their homeland. And burying the people within the land is an act of faith in that future possession. Likewise, in the story of Joseph, Joseph, his body is taken up out of Egypt with Exodus.

And as they go into the land, they take the body of Joseph with them. This, again, is important. That the movement of bodies after death is an incipient sign of a belief in resurrection.

That this is not the end of the story. That there is a confidence that God will act on behalf of his people. And those who die in faith express that faith in part by where they are buried.

Sarah being buried within the land would then be an expression of the connection

between the seed of Sarah and the land in which she is laid to rest. He's a foreigner and a sojourner among the people of Canaan. He's a resident alien.

He is not just a stranger from outside but he's someone who is dwelling within the land or has connections with the land. And he asks for a property, for a burial place among them that he might bury his dead. Now what he's looking for is not just somewhere to bury his dead.

He's looking for a property. Somewhere that will be his, a holding within the land. Now there's a difference between just being given a certain area of land that he can use and having a holding.

Something that's truly his. There are many people who would be very generous and say you can bury in our plot but he wants something more than that. He wants something that's his.

Not just the allowance of someone else's property and the extension of hospitality. He wants a possession. So it's like being in someone's house and saying you're very welcome to stay.

You can use this room etc. Make yourself at home. Making yourself at home is a very different thing from actually having a home.

And so if you were to say to the person who invited you in that way, I want to buy that room. I want it to be my own in the full sense. I don't want to just be a guest.

I want to have a place that is my own. That would be taking a significant step further. And this is what Abraham is doing at this point.

He's not going to just accept a gift or hospitality. He wants to have possession of a land. A particular territory that is within the land that will be a down payment of his future inheritance within it.

And so there's a negotiation and a haggling that occurs after this. The people say you are a mighty prince or a prince of God, which suggests he's maybe a spiritual leader among them as well. They can see he's a spiritual priest-like leader.

And they follow him and they respect him and they think God is on his side. And for that reason they will treat him with honour. You're a mighty prince or a prince of God among us.

Bury your dead in the choicest of our burial places. None of us will withhold from you his burial place that you may bury your dead. Now he wants not just a place to bury.

He wants a place that is his possession that he can bury. And what they're offering here is essentially the hospitality of any one of our burial plots. You can bury within our plots.

It will be Hittite land, but you can have some plot within that. You can be treated as a guest of the Hittites. You can also be someone who's treated with great honour and respect among us.

And again, in part, this would suggest that Abraham has the opportunity to be one of the Hittites himself. That you're so respected among us, we will have you as one of us. That you can be like the Hittites.

And we will treat you as a mighty prince among us. We'll respect you. We'll give you the choicest of our possessions.

And we're not going to withhold anything from you. But you have to consider yourself as among us rather than having a possession of your own that is distinct from ours. And Abraham doesn't accept that.

That's not what he's looking for. And so he talks about the cave of Machpelah. He wants this particular double cave for two-layered cave for his possession.

And he wants it at the end of the field. It's at the end of the field of Ephron, the son of Zohar. And he doesn't ask for the field.

He asks for the cave alone. And Ephron talks with him and he says he'll give him the field and the cave that is in it. He gives it to him in the presence of the people.

And he says he grants it on three separate occasions. He says, bury your dead. Again, this isn't quite what Abraham wants.

Abraham doesn't just want the hospitality. He doesn't just want a gift. He wants a possession.

And when we think about gift, for instance, if someone gives you something, you can be beholden to them. You have a responsibility to them. Whereas if you buy something, generally when you purchase something, the relationship between you and the person you purchase it from is dissolved immediately upon the purchase.

So if someone extends hospitality to you, there's this continual relationship. If they give you something, you'll be beholden to them as well. But if you purchase something from someone, you're not beholden to them in the same way.

It becomes yours in a deeper sense. And that is what Abraham is looking for here. But Ephron offers him not just the cave, but the field as well.

And he says, bury your dead. But Abraham, he knows, I think, that Abraham is not going to be satisfied with this. And maybe he's trying to get money out of Abraham by offering the field and the cave when Abraham just wants the cave.

But Abraham returns with Baringdown and he speaks to Ephron. He says, if you'll give it, please hear me. I will give you the money.

I'll give you money for the field. Take it from me and I will bury my dead there. And Ephron answers again, but he doesn't really directly answer Abraham, but he answers him in a sort of implicit way.

My Lord, listen to me. The land is worth 400 shekels of silver. What is that between you and me? So bury your dead.

Now he knows Abraham wants to pay for the land. He wants it as a possession. And the amount that he asks for it is a huge amount.

I mean, this is a king's ransom. This is, well, maybe not quite a king's ransom, but it's a very significant amount of money. This is about over 50 years of a regular wage earner's labor.

We need to remember, Abraham is an exceedingly rich man. But even so, this is a lot of money to ask for a possession, particularly when you compare it to the amount that is paid for places in other parts of Scripture. This is, for instance, the potter's field that is bought with the money for which Jesus betrayed 30 shekels of silver.

Now this is 400 shekels of silver. These are huge. This is a huge amount that he's asking for.

And it's worth bearing in mind, partly as a sense of just how rich Abraham is at this point. He's incredibly wealthy. And also, just seeing the negotiations taking place, Abraham is willing to pay this amount of money to have a possession within the land.

Even if it's just a field and a cave, this is some place that he can call his own. A first peg down in the land. This is his land.

This is the land that is promised to him. And by burying his dead there, he is expressing confidence that God will raise his people up from their death-like slumber. The slumber that God puts Abraham himself into during telling him about his people being under foreign power for 400 years.

Within that sort of death-like slumber, that they will be raised up. And so burying the dead within the land is a sign of resurrection faith. That one day God will raise them up from the death-like slumber of Egypt.

He will deliver them from the womb of Misraim and bring them into the promised land as a new people. A people that have been raised up, new-born and ready to take possession of what God has given for them. Later on we'll see, as I mentioned, in the story of Joseph and his father.

His sons, in the story of Jacob, carried him to the land of Canaan and buried him in the cave of the field of Machphola before Mamre. Which Abraham bought with the field from Ephron the Hittite as property for a burial place. And then later on, Joseph took an oath from the children of Israel saying, God will surely visit you and you shall carry up my bones from here.

So Joseph died being 110 years old and they embalmed him and he was put in a coffin in Egypt. That ends the story of Genesis. And the ending is an important one because it sets the context of the Exodus as one of resurrection faith.

That you are going to raise up these bones and bring them into the promised land. And the site of the cave of Machphola, this first possession in the land, being a burial place, is then associated with God's promise that he will raise his people up. It's a memorial that all will be theirs on a future occasion.

This is not just a gift, this is not just hospitality from the Hittites. This is not just a sense of honour given to a resident alien who's honoured among them. This is a sign of possession.

That they own this property, this is truly their own. And one day they'll own all of the land. Abraham, as he spoke to the king of Sodom, refused to accept any of the spoil from his hands.

He did not want to say that the king of Sodom had made him rich. Likewise, he does not want to say that he is just beholden to the Hittites. That he is their guest, that he is someone who has been given something by the Hittites and he's beholden to them in some respect, to return in some manner something to them.

No, he buys from them so that he can say that only God alone has made him rich. And that this possession will come from God who is the owner of heaven and earth. Thank you very much for listening.

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