

CHAPTER 23

And Sarah's life was a hundred and twenty-seven years, the years of Sarah's life. And Sarah died in Kiriath-Arba, which is Hebron, in the land of Canaan, and Abraham came to mourn Sarah and to keen for her. And Abraham rose from before his dead and he spoke to the Hittites, saying: "I am a sojourning settler with you. Grant me a burial-holding with you, and let me bury my dead now before me." And

1. *years, the years*. The Hebrew is still more extravagant in its use of repetition, unusually repeating "year" after a hundred, after twenty, and after seven. The same device of stylistic emphasis is used in the obituary notices of Abraham and Ishmael.

2. *Kiriath-Arba, which is Hebron*. The older name of the town means "city of four," perhaps a reference to its being a federation (a possible meaning of "Hebron") of four townlets. (Alternately, the name might refer to "four hills.") But some scholars think the earlier name is a Hebraization of a non-Semitic place-name, which would have been given to the town by its "Hittite" inhabitants.

3. *Hittites*. Whether these are actually Hittites who have migrated from Anatolia into Canaan or a loose Hebrew designation for non-Semitic Canaanites is unclear.

4. *sojourning settler . . . Grant me a burial-holding*. The Hebrew, which reads literally, "sojourner and settler," is a legal term that means "resident alien," but the bureaucratic coloration of that English equivalent misrepresents the stylistic decorum of the Hebrew. At the very beginning of Abraham's speech, he announces his vulnerable legal status, a hard fact of institutional reality which stands in ironic tension with his inward consciousness that the whole land has been promised to him and his seed. "Grant"—literally "give"—is pointedly

- 6 the Hittites answered Abraham, saying: “Pray, hear us, my lord. You are
a prince of God among us! In the pick of our graves bury your dead. No
7 man among us will deny you his grave for burying your dead.” And
8 Abraham rose and bowed to the folk of the land, to the Hittites. And
he spoke with them, saying, “If you have it in your hearts that I should
bury my dead now before me, hear me, entreat for me Ephron son of
9 Zohar, and let him grant me the cave of Machpelah that belongs to him,
which is at the far end of his field. At the full price let him grant it to
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ambiguous both here and in the subsequent exchange with Ephron. Abraham avoids the frank term “sell,” yet speaks of acquiring a “holding” (*ʿaḥuzah*), a word that clearly indicates permanent legal possession.

6. *Pray*. This translation follows E. A. Speiser, as well as the ancient Aramaic version of Yonatan ben Uziel, in reading *lu* for *lo* (“to him”) and moving the monosyllabic term from the end of verse 5 to the beginning of verse 6. The identical emendation is made at the end of verse 14 moving into the beginning of verse 15. Though one critic, Meir Sternberg (1991), has made an ingenious attempt to rescue the Masoretic Text at these two points, there is a simple compelling argument against it: the formula for introducing direct speech, *leʿmor*, “saying,” is always immediately followed by the direct speech, not by a preposition “to him” (*lo*). And the repetition of the optative particle *lu*, “pray,” is just right for beginning each round of this elaborately polite bargaining.

You are a prince of God among us! In the pick of our graves bury your dead. On the surface, this is a courtly gesture of extravagant generosity. But as Meir Sternberg (1991), who provides an acute reading of the sinuous turns of the subsurface bargaining, nicely shows, there is ambiguity of intention here: a certain exaggeration in calling Abraham a prince of God—which could simply mean “preeminent dignitary”—“among us” (*he* had claimed to be only “with” them); and a pointed deletion of any reference to a “holding” or to transfer of property.

9. *at the far end of his field*. In settling on this particular location for a burial cave, Abraham wants to make it clear that he will not need to pass through or encroach on the rest of the Hittite property. “Field,” *sadeh*, a flexible term for territory that stretches from field to steppe, could mean something like “land” or “property” in context, but rendering it as “field” preserves the distinction from *ʿerets*, “land,” as in the repeated phrase, “folk of the land.”

At the full price. At this point Abraham makes it altogether unambiguous

me in your midst as a burial-holding.” And Ephron was sitting in the 10
 midst of the Hittites, and Ephron the Hittite answered Abraham in the
 hearing of the Hittites, all the assembled in the gate of his town, say-
 ing: “Pray, my lord, hear me. The field I grant you and the cave that is 11
 in it. I grant it to you in full view of my kinfolk. I grant it to you. Bury
 your dead.” And Abraham bowed before the folk of the land, and he 12,13
 spoke to Ephron in the hearing of the folk of the land, saying: “If you
 would but hear me—I give the price of the field, take it from me, and
 let me bury my dead there.” And Ephron answered Abraham, saying: 14

that the “grant” he has been mentioning means a sale. The Hebrew is literally
 “with full silver,” and the phrase in verse 16, “the silver that he spoke of,” refers
 back to this speech.

10. *in the hearing of the Hittites, all the assembled in the gate of his town.* Legal
 business was conducted in the gateway: the men assembled there constitute,
 as E. A. Speiser proposes, a kind of town council; and these two phrases in
 apposition are a legal formula. Scholarship has abundantly observed that the
 actual language used by Ephron and Abraham and the narrator bristles with
 set terms familiar from other ancient Near Eastern documents for the con-
 veyance of property.

11. *Pray, my lord, hear me.* Reading here *lu* for the Masoretic *lo’* (“no”). This
 polite formula for initiating speech is not the sort of repetition that allows sig-
 nificant variation.

The field. As Meir Sternberg shrewdly notes, Abraham had wanted to buy
 only the cave at the far end of the field, and so Ephron’s seeming generosity in
 throwing the unrequested field into the bargain is a ploy for demanding an
 exorbitant price.

I grant you . . . I grant it . . . I grant it. This is a performative speech-act, the
 repetition indicating that Ephron is formally conveying the plot to Abraham.
 Ephron, of course, knows that what Abraham really wants is to be able to buy
 the land and thus acquire inalienable right to it, and so this “bestowal” is really
 a maneuver to elicit an offer from Abraham.

15 “Pray, my lord, hear me. Land for four hundred silver shekels between
 16 me and you, what does it come to? Go bury your dead.” And Abraham
 heeded Ephron and Abraham weighed out to Ephron the silver that he
 spoke of in the hearing of the Hittites, four hundred silver shekels at
 17 the merchants’ tried weight. And Ephron’s field at Machpelah by
 Mamre, the field and the cave that was in it and every tree in the field,
 18 within its boundaries all around, passed over to Abraham as a posses-
 sion, in the full view of the Hittites, all the assembled in the gate of his
 19 town. And then Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the
 Machpelah field by Mamre, which is Hebron, in the land of Canaan.
 20 And the field and the cave that was in it passed over to Abraham as a
 burial-holding from the Hittites.

15. *Land for four hundred silver shekels.* A comparison with the prices stipulated for the purchase of property elsewhere in the Bible suggests that this pittance is actually a king’s ransom. Abraham, having twice declared his readiness to pay “the full price,” is in no position to object to the extortionate rate. In fact, his only real bargaining aim has been to make a legitimate purchase, and he is unwilling to haggle over the price, just as he refused to accept booty from the king of Salem. Perhaps Ephron refers to the property as “land” (*’erets*) instead of *sadeh* in order to provide rhetorical mitigation for the huge sum, intimating, by way of a term that also means “country,” that Abraham is free to imagine he is getting more than a field with a burial cave for his money.

16. *heeded.* That is, agreed. But it is the same verb, “to hear” (*shama’*), repeatedly used at the beginning of the bargaining speeches.

weighed out . . . four hundred silver shekels. The transaction antedates the use of coins, and the silver is divided into weights (the literal meaning of shekel).

17–20. The language of these concluding verses is emphatically legalistic, recapitulating the phraseology that would appear in a contract for the conveyance of property. The verbal stem, *qanah*, “to buy,” which was studiously avoided in the bargaining, finally surfaces in the term for “possession” (*miqnah*). Many interpreters view this whole episode as a final gesture of the aged Abraham toward laying future claim to possession of the land. Meir Sternberg, on the other hand, reads it as thematically coordinated with the previous episode of the binding of Isaac: first the promise of seed seems threatened in the command to sacrifice Isaac; then the promise of the land seems to be mocked in Abraham’s need to bargain with these sharp-dealing Hittites for a mere gravesite.