

JANUARY 9

Genesis 22, 23

Today, we get the huge blessing of reviewing, the account in Chapter 22 of that greatest test that Abraham took - the one he did pass with flying colors! Bible scholars see this account as a type of Christ's death. It would be worth it to write this episode as one of the 'Jesus sightings' in your notebook. Let me explain

- We are not sure of the exact location of Mt. Moriah, but from the geographical locators in the text, it is in the vicinity of the city of Jerusalem and a good many have surmised that Moriah and Golgotha (the mountain on which Jesus is crucified) are one and the same.
- What is much more certain is that God was asking Abraham to sacrifice his dearly loved son - the son of promise - and that Abraham could not have understood what was going on. Imagine, if you are a parent, hearing a command to sacrifice your only son. It seemed incredible, it seemed reprehensible, it seemed to be totally out of the character of God, but Abraham had learned to trust God even with the life of the son of promise upon whom everything else clearly depended. Hebrews 11 tells us that Abraham was thinking that if it were necessary God would raise Isaac up from the dead. Abraham's response to Isaac, "*God will provide for Himself the lamb,*" and his promise to the servants, "*we will worship and then we will return,*" are indicators of the strength of Abraham's fully matured faith.
- The third parallel with Jesus' death is the fact that God provided a substitute! Isaac did not need to die because God provided a ram caught in the thicket. Jesus is the substitute that God has provided for you and for me to die in our place.

On the very same mountain, a son is set up for a blood sacrifice and a substitute is provided. God is setting up a story that will make sense of the BIG GOD story throughout scripture. He is setting up the Israelites for an incredible climax and he is setting up us Bible readers for the same thing. Watch for many more of these moments throughout our reading.

A big question always comes up from this passage, though. Why would God ask such a thing of Abraham even if he never intended to carry it through? Perhaps to prove to Abraham that he had now mastered the test of trust; perhaps to share His own heart with Abraham, the friend of God, so that there would be at least one person among the race of men whom He had created and would redeem, who would at least partially understand what God Himself would do when sending His own Son to be the sacrifice offered up for the sins of humanity. Perhaps also to provide a marker on the road of redemption that would never be able to be properly understood until after the great act was done, but which would then stand to be read by any who would look upon it as a clear testimony that the death of Jesus Christ upon a hill called Golgotha was always in the plan of the God, who would provide for Himself a lamb for the sacrifice.

One last note - there is another very revealing name of God here - this one originates with Abraham: Jehovah Jireh - the Lord Provides. It comes from the name of the place where God provided the Ram for Isaac. Jehovah Jireh – J-I-R-E-H... write it down on your 'names of God page.

Chapter 23 - While at first glance, chapter 23 may not seem as exciting as some of the others you have read (especially chapter 22 which is one of the great chapters of the Bible), this chapter has an importance of their own.

It is at first a surprise - the fact that Moses devotes only two sentences to the death of Sarah, giving us no details at all. He doesn't even bother to sum up her life or offer an epitaph. Then he goes on to spend a whole chapter telling us about how Abraham bargained for and acquired a piece of ground with a cave on it in which to bury her. It is strange to see how much emphasis the book of Genesis places upon this incident. I think however, that there are at least two reasons for including this story in the Biblical account. The first reason is probably because this is the first plot of ground in the Promised Land that Abraham actually ever came to own - in fact it's the only piece of ground in the Promised Land that Abraham would ever own! God said - "Abraham, I'm going to give it all to you and to your posterity" but Abraham himself never actually formally owned anything more than this field with a cave in it. But he still believed!

It has been well over 60 years since God made the amazing promise to Abraham. To be sure, He has blessed him exceedingly and Isaac has been born - a miracle child. But the two key elements of the promise - the land and the nations that are to come from him? Where are they? It's been 60+ years and Abraham doesn't own one square foot of the Promised Land and Isaac isn't even married yet. Now Abraham finally gets to own a piece of ground and it's a cemetery plot that he has just had to pay an outrageous price to possess! The epitaph of Hebrews 11:13 for Abraham and Sarah is pretty appropriate - "*All those people were still living by faith when they died,*" the writer of Hebrews says. "*They did not receive the things promised, they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance and they admitted that they were foreigners and strangers on earth...*" In the acquisition of a burial plot - the first and only piece of ground he would ever own in the land of Promise - Abraham proves that he is focused not upon an earthly inheritance but upon a heavenly one.

Jesus says that we should "*lay up our treasures in heaven*" – Abraham, even though he was wealthy, worked very, very hard at doing just that. How about you? Where are your treasures? In your job, your education, your family? That four bedroom house with a two car garage? The truth is that our treasures on earth are uncertain, but our treasures in heaven will always be there...

The second reason for the inclusion of a blow by blow account of a real estate transaction may well be to serve as a strong confirmation to skeptical twenty-first century people of the accuracy and historical reliability of the Scriptures.

Until the early 1900s, critics of the Historicity of Genesis pointed out the fact that the Genesis account talks about a "Hittite" nation that no other extant histories ever mentioned, and the Bible acts as though this Hittite nation were an important people group in the ancient world. The Genesis authors, according to the theory, made them up, or at the very least greatly exaggerated the importance of a small tribe. Well, that theory, quite literally, went up in a cloud of dust in the second quarter of the twentieth century, when archaeologists began digging in Turkey. They unearthed the capital city of a very powerful civilization - the Hittite empire. Further work in Turkey and ancient Egypt turned up in each location a copy of a mutual non-aggression pact signed by the Pharaoh of Egypt, at one of its strongest periods, and the leader of the Hittite nation, because each nation was too powerful for the other to defeat!

Even more than that these two chapters are literally "laced" with local color accurately reflecting customs which could only have been known to those who really lived in the time and place in which the story is set. Take for example the curious exchange between Abraham and the Hittite Ephron. With polite flattery Abraham says, "I want to buy your cave." The response comes back, "No, for such a mighty prince, we'll just give you the cave." All of that, we now know, was standard procedure for entering into negotiations. Abraham says, "I'd like to buy Ephron's cave" and Ephron responds, "Abraham, you can have it - it's yours. Not just the cave but the whole field as well." Pretty generous - right? Not quite. You see, Hittite law said that if you bought a man's property you also got his feudal responsibilities in the bargain, that is the taxes and the legal obligations to the overlord. But if you only bought part of the property, he retained those responsibilities. You got those burdens only if you bought all his property. If he retained any, then he still had them. No wonder Ephron wanted Abraham to take the whole property.

And 400 shekels as the value of the land? It's a little hard to be absolutely certain of monetary values in patriarchal times, but it looks from other land prices mentioned in Scripture as though Abraham got taken here for a very long ride on the price. Ephron got rich on this deal - but when you are wealthy and you need a place to bury your wife - you don't haggle about the price. Abraham just paid it "*in the hearing of the sons of Heth at the gate of the city,*" just as we now know Hittite custom required.

By the way - even though the actual sites of most Biblical events are now somewhat dubious (the stable of Bethlehem for example - we are not really sure where they are - about them we can only make guesses.) The site of Macpelah was never lost - you can go there today if you want to.

If you'd like to do some more research on the light that archaeology has shed on the Genesis account, there are many books that you can consult. You might start however, by checking the New Bible Dictionary - the article on archeology - paying special attention to the section on "Cuneiform Inscriptions", and in particular, the ones located at Nuzi.

And this has been Mark Ashton, reminding you that God's word is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

Peace be with you.