

PARASHAH TWENTY

Genesis 23:1–20; 1Kings 1:1–31; Acts 7:1–18

notes by Tim Hegg

The Death & Burial of Sarah

The primary subject of our *parashah* is the death and burial of Sarah, Abraham’s wife. Abraham goes to great lengths to acquire, through the local customs, a piece of land explicitly for a place to bury Sarah. How inconvenient! How expensive! The “negotiable currency” (עֶבֶר לְסִחָרָה, cf. b.*Bava Metzia* 87a) was 25 times the normal price: 10,000 shekels rather than 400 common shekels. In current exchange rates, this would be about \$2200. Undoubtedly this was a very handsome price. But besides being a lot of money, for a nomad, silver was hard to come by. Payment in sheep or flocks would have been easy, but silver was another matter. This meant having to trade and negotiate with people outside of the clan on the basis of their currency.

So why didn’t Abraham do the easy, less expensive thing: cremation? Burning the dead was not uncommon in the pagan cultures of the time. On the contrary, Abraham shows us that the manner in which we bury the dead *speaks volumes about what we believe regarding God, and especially His place as Creator and Redeemer.*

Abraham knew God—he walked before Him blamelessly (Gen 17:1f). He therefore had come to accept the truth that God had created mankind *in his image*, and that this image was somehow mysteriously present both in the material and immaterial parts of man. The body, wonderfully fashioned, is the very height of God’s creative efforts, outshining all the rest of His magnificent work. Here, within the intricate weaving together of the human body, the act of creation continues, for it is through the handiwork of God that the oneness of man and wife becomes evident in the birth of a child. Here, within the body, is the best evidence for the deep concepts of רֹּחַ, *ruach*, נֶפֶשׁ, *nephesh*, and חַיָּה, *life*. Here would be the very symbol of the *kehilah* (congregation) of Yeshua, Who would be portrayed as the “head,” with His followers being the “body.” Here would be the supreme example of God’s creative ability, which would baffle mankind throughout his history, and present to him a subject for the arts and sciences as nothing else. Here, in short, would exist the fingerprint of God so evident in the world that man could never ultimately deny the obvious existence of an all wise and all knowing God, for only such a One could have created and fashioned such a thing of utter beauty and wonder. As the Psalmist declared, “I will give thanks to You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made...” (Ps 139:14).

For Abraham, remembering his wife Sarah through the act of burial was to remember her Creator, to give to Him the respect He deserves for the creative work He exhibited in the body of this loved one. To carefully return the body to the ground from which it had originally come was to give back to God that which was rightfully His and to allow His creative order to fulfill its role in returning the body to dust. To have laid such a masterpiece of God’s hand in a fire was simply unthinkable to Abraham, as it should be to us. Always in the biblical (and thus Jewish) tradition, the care of the body after death has stood as a hallmark of our recognition of God’s wonderful acts of creation. Our attempts to honor the body at the time of burial is first and foremost a statement of our respect to God as the awesome Creator.

Moreover, when we carefully and with reverence commit the body of our loved ones to the ground, we follow the example of God Himself. In Deut 34:6 we discover that God Himself buried

the body of Moses: “And He buried him in the valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor; but no man knows his burial place to this day.” This Torah text was understood by the rabbis of the Mishnah and Bavli as a biblical mandate to bury the dead: “Just as the Holy One, blessed by He, buried the dead, as it is written, ‘And he buried him in the valley,’ so should you bury the dead” (b.*Sota* 14a; cf. m.*Berachot* 3.1; b.*Berachot* 14b).

But there is a second aspect to the burial of a loved one: the hope of the resurrection. To say that God is less able to resurrect a body that has been destroyed by fire or whatever is simply wrong. Surely God is able to even create from nothing that which exists. But this is not the point. Burial is not a statement about God’s power or lack of it. It is a statement that says we await the resurrection of this very body, and we therefore do all in our power *to testify of this fact by leaving the body in tact as much as possible*. Since the body will be resurrected as a whole (no parts missing), we testify to this by attempting, as much as is within our power, to lay the whole body to rest. Obviously, cremation is at the opposite end of that scale. What is the testimony to the unbelieving world when a body of a loved one is cremated? It says “this is the end, there is no more existence for this one, nor will there be.” That is not the message of the Torah! Abraham believed in the resurrection as the previous chapter (*Akeidah*) taught, for he fully expected both to sacrifice Isaac and to see him resurrected from the dead (cf. Heb. 11:19). He thus also believed that Sarah would be resurrected by God’s power, and *he did everything possible in the method of burial to give witness to this belief*. We should do the same.

There is yet another important aspect of burial, that of remembering. The hope of resurrection, that the one we have loved will once again live, causes us to reflect upon the way that life touched us here in this world. As long as the memories of a loved one remain in our minds and hearts, to that extent that person remains with us. In remembering their life, they continue to impact us and, in one way or another, shape our own thoughts and life-patterns. The annual *yartzeit* aids in this memorial, and keeps alive that memory of the one who has gone from us. The realization that the very bones of the one who has died remain in the grave awaiting the resurrection from the dead is a powerful reminder that the one we miss will live again. It is for this very reason that we struggle with the indefiniteness of the death of a loved one whose body has not been recovered. Deep within our souls we long to see the closure of a funeral and burial in which the hope of the resurrection is clearly stated and the remains of our loved one are at rest, awaiting the time of Messiah’s return. This is not some “pre-science” mythology or cult, but the pattern of Scripture in which God teaches His people the value of burial. Thus, through burial the remembering exercise is enhanced and benefited.

The opposite is true with cremation. Here it is as though one attempts to blot out the memory of the one who had died, to forever remove any lasting physical proof of their existence. In contrast, the custom in Yeshua’s own Jewish community was to gather the bones of the one who had been buried and carefully deposit them in a small box called an ossuary. This gathering process, which occurred 1 year after the burial (and thus is the precursor of our *yartzeit* practice) was a vivid reinforcement of the need to remember, to ponder the manner in which this one who has now passed, continues to touch the lives of those who remain.

In stark contrast, then, is the blotting out of Haman’s memory. Haman and his sons were hanged, but the Tanach does not mention if they were buried or not. Another text (the Lxx “L” text) fills in the gap by saying that they were left out for the birds of prey to devour. For the ancients, to be devoured by birds of prey was to be given the worst possible “burial,” that of neglect and waste. The

point is that without a proper burial, the memory of Haman would be lost. Rather than having his memory continue to form and shape our lives as do the memories of our loved ones who honored the Lord, the memory of Haman is blotted out of our memories, that is, he ceases to have any effect upon us in terms of being a model to follow.

This *parashah* has yet another important emphasis for our day, namely, that it records a legal transaction between Abraham and the people who dwelt in the Land during his time. Here we have a deed of sale, cast in legal language of the time, showing that Abraham purchased a parcel of land, including a well-known cave which was on that land.

So Ephron's field, which was in Machpelah, which faced Mamre, the field and cave which was in it, and all the trees which were in the field, that were within all the confines of its border, were deeded over to Abraham for a possession in the presence of the sons of Heth, before all who went in at the gate of his city. (Gen 23:17–18)

Here, in the eternal words of the Torah, is a written decree of land ownership! And since there is no record of any of Abraham's descendants selling this parcel to another party, we may say categorically that it still remains the property of the descendants of Abraham. Therefore, anyone who attempts to sell it, give it away, or in some other manner shift ownership to another party, is acting contrary to the legal status of ownership herein recorded. Moreover, this text proves beyond doubt that this land belonged to Abraham in antiquity, and therefore the claims that his clan had no possession of the Land is a bold-faced lie.

The Cave of Machpelah is situated in the region of the city of Hebron (Kiryat Arba). Herod, between the years of 37–40 CE built a massive structure over the cave, making it a place for prayer. This structure stands to this day. During the ensuing years, it was used as a Christian Church and later as a mosque (two minarets still remain on the site). The presence of a synagogue, however, has been maintained since the days of antiquity.

In our times, the Cave of Machpelah continues to be contested, and Jewish worshippers have at times been banned from entering the area. There remain a number of rabbis, as well as Yeshiva students, who continue to meet regularly at the Tomb of the Patriarchs, though they do so under danger of their own lives.

This is yet another case where the enemies of Israel are doing all in their power to erase any evidence of Jewish presence from the early history of the Land. Such attempts, however, will ultimately meet with failure: contained in the unchangeable word of God are the historical facts that prove not only the presence of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the Land, but also the nation that God formed out of their descendants. Our current *parashah* is just one such notice.

Our *parashah* ends with the terse statement that “Abraham buried his wife.” This short notice, without any further details, epitomizes the simplicity that has always characterized Jewish burial practices. From an Hebraic perspective, the most important aspects of burial are the hope of the future resurrection, and the on-going memories of the loved one who has passed away. Accepting that death is an inevitable part of the life-cycle of mankind, the ritual of burial is viewed as a *mitzvah* acknowledging the sovereignty of God, the mortality of mankind, and the hope of the resurrection.

The Mishnah records an early rabbinic teaching regarding those acts of obedience that afford a reward in this life, but which anticipate a greater reward in the world to come:

These are things which have no [specified] measure: (1) [the quantity of produce designated as] peah, (2) [the quantity of produce given as] firstfruits, (3) [the value of] the appearance offering, (4) [the performance of] righteous deeds, (5) and [time spent in] study of Torah. These are things the benefit of which a person enjoys in this world, while the principal remains for him in the world to come: (1) [deeds in] honor of father and mother, (2) [performance of] righteous deeds, (3) and [acts which] bring peace between a man and his fellow. But the study of Torah is as important as all of them together. (m.*Peah* 1:1)

In the category of “righteous deeds” (גְּמִילוּת הַחַסְדִּים) is included “accompanying the dead to the grave.” Later rabbinic ruling required that if one saw a funeral procession, he was obligated to join it. “Accompanying the dead to the grave” was considered a “true kindness” since one could expect no reciprocation of any sort. According to the Talmud (b.*Berachot* 18a), one who sees a funeral procession and does not join it “transgresses thereby ‘whoso mocks the poor (i.e., the dead) blasphemes his Maker’” (Prov 17:5). Only a bridal procession takes priority, for to honor the living is considered greater than to honor the dead (b.*Ketuvot* 17a).

It was on the basis of our *parashah*, and Abraham’s burial of Sarah, as well as other texts, that the rabbis decreed a swift burial of the dead. According to Jewish tradition, the body should be buried within 24 to 48 hours if possible.

We see, then, that the manner in which we honor those who have died speaks directly to our own perspective on the creative acts of God, the sanctity of life, and our belief in the coming resurrection.

The *haftarah* chosen for this Torah *parashah* has the obvious parallel of King David’s growing old and nearing death. Recognizing the soon demise of the king, a battle for the throne ensued among his sons. Adonijah, the son of Chaggit, was apparently the first to take matters into his own hands and declare himself king. He gathered together those whom he thought would support him in his efforts to acquire the throne: Abiathar the priest, Joab the commander of the armies, and other men of the military. Those who were loyal to David and would thus have supported Solomon for king were obviously not invited to Adonijah’s coronation ceremonies. They were Zadok the priest; Benaiah, who was most likely David’s personal body guard (2Sam 23:23); Nathan, David’s court prophet; Shimei, one of David’s elite military officers (2Sam 23:11); and Rei, who most likely was also a close military adviser to David.

The primary point of the story in our *haftarah* is the clear declaration of King David that Solomon would be his successor to the throne. With Nathan the prophet as witness, David takes a solemn vow before Bethsheba:

The king vowed and said, “As Adonai lives, who has redeemed my life from all distress, surely as I vowed to you by Adonai the God of Israel, saying, ‘Your son Solomon shall be king after me, and he shall sit on my throne in my place,’ I will indeed do so this day” (1Ki 1:29–30)

The importance of the Davidic dynasty related not only, nor primarily, to the historical kingship of Israel, but to the covenant God had made with David (2Sam 7), a covenant that would find its ultimate fulfillment in the Messiah, Himself a “son of David.” From what we read in 2Sam 7, David was made aware of the messianic fulfillment of the covenant, as Peter also makes clear in his Shavuot sermon (Acts 2:29f). Thus, King David’s oath to Bethsheba, and his declaration that Solomon should be king after him, was in accord with what he had apparently received by divine

revelation.

A number of principles are illustrated in our *haftarah* text. First, it is always the way of usurpers to gain the confidence of people in hopes of attaining their personal goals. Just as Absalom had stolen the hearts of many by feigning a true desire to help when his father, David, was “too busy” (2Sam 15:6), so Adonijah, described as a “handsome man,” (v. 6), had carefully garnered the friendship of key leaders with a design to capturing the throne. This highlights a sad but true reality: not everyone who treats us as a friend is sincere in that friendship. The sterling qualities of true friendship will always be evident when the circumstances require giving rather than getting. As our Master taught: “Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13).

A second principle illustrated in our *haftarah* is that imposters can gain a substantial following. Adonijah had organized a large coronation party and many had accepted his invitation. Adonijah had invited all of the king’s sons, his brothers, as well as “all the men of Judah, the king’s servants.” And by the description given of the gathering, the whole festival was marked with a strong sense of religious fervor. Many sacrifices were offered and it appears as though many were in attendance. Yet the whole thing was a sham because Adonijah planned it all in secret, hoping to gain the throne without his father even knowing he had. His plan, apparently, was that once he had gained the support of many people, David would have had no option but to give him the throne. Of course, his plan was doomed from the beginning because it went contrary to what God had planned. This reminds us that just because a given leader attracts the attention of the masses does not mean his message is correct.

One other principle may be illustrated from how this story ends. David commanded Zadok, Nathan, and Benaiah to publicly crown Solomon and declare him king (vv. 32f). When they did so, the text tells us that “All the people went up after him [Solomon], and the people were playing on flutes and rejoicing with great joy, so that the earth shook at their noise” (v. 40). The principle is this: the masses tend to be fickle. One day they are proclaiming Adonijah as king, and the next day they are cheering on Solomon! This reminds us that so-called “political correctness,” which has become the litmus test of acceptability in our times, is no standard at all. What is “politically correct” one day is “politically incorrect” the next. A “changing standard” is an oxymoron. In stark contrast, God’s standards do not change because He never changes (Mal 3:6).

The Apostolic portion chosen for this Torah *parashah* contains Stephen’s defense before the Sanhedrin. Note carefully how he bases his entire defense upon the Torah narratives. In the verses we have chosen for this *parashah*, Stephen gives a thumbnail sketch of Genesis 11–50, including the notice of Abraham’s purchase of the cave of Machpelah for a burial place. But did Stephen have his facts just a little wrong? In v. 16 he states that Abraham bought the cave from the “sons of Hamor in Shechem,” yet in our Torah text, it says that Abraham bought the cave from the “sons of Heth” in Hebron. In fact, the burial place that Jacob purchased was from the sons of Hamor in Shechem (Josh 24:32), where Joseph and his family were buried. Apparently Stephen was telescoping the two burial locations into one. The fact that Luke records it this way, even though he may well have known differently, shows that he intended to make an accurate record of what Stephen had said. Of course, the mix-up in Stephen’s speech did not affect the overall point of his message, namely, that God had made a promise which He would keep, and that this promise was fulfilled in Yeshua.

What was the outcome of Stephen’s speech? If the test of good homiletics is that the audience

is moved to agree with the speaker, then Stephen's speech was a total failure. Having heard the words of Stephen, they were "cut to the quick" and began "gnashing their teeth." So his words had the proper effect—they brought true conviction. But then they took Stephen to the edge of the city and stoned him to death. His message had been far too true, and thus incontrovertible. If his words were allowed to stand, there was no other option than to agree that Yeshua was, in fact, the promised Messiah. Rather than give in to the truth, the leaders took measures to silence Stephen forever, or so they thought. Instead, by the sovereign work of the Spirit, his words were recorded by Luke, forever to remain in the Scriptures, an unchanging record of Stephen's testimony.

We do well, then, to heed the message of Stephen, and to see in Yeshua the One in Whom all the promises of God are "yes and amen" (2Cor 1:2).