

Introduction

Some years have passed by the beginning of chapter 23 because Sarah is listed as 127 years of age. She was 90 at the birth of Isaac (17:17, 21:5). Isaac was perhaps a teenager when his father was commanded to offer him (chapter 22), and now he is 37 years old. He is not yet married, but will be by the end of chapter 24!

A couple of Bible “firsts” are found in chapters 22 and 23. In 22:5, we see the first occurrence of the word “worship” in the English Bible. The verb itself means to bow down, and here the setting is one of sacrifice. Of course, this is not the first time that worship occurred in Biblical history, for Noah (8:20) and Abraham (12:7, 8, 13:18, 22:9) had built altars and obviously were worshippers of the true God.

In chapter 23, we see the first Biblical narrative about the burial of a dead person. Actually Genesis 15:15 is the first mention of a grave or burial, but it is in the context of God’s promise to Abraham that he would live to a ripe old age and be buried in peace.

I. Death and Burial of Sarah, ch. 23

The main incident in this chapter is Sarah’s death. So, Abraham needed a burial plot for his wife, and eventually for himself (25:9), Isaac, Rebekah, and Jacob (49:29-32, 50:13, Acts 7:15-16). Joseph’s bones were buried in a different spot (Joshua 24:32).

The account is quite detailed in its relating the haggling over the property. Abraham was a “foreigner” among the sons of Heth (v. 4) and so he had to request to purchase a burial plot from them. The tribal leaders in vv. 5-6 tell Abraham that because of his reputation, they will simply give him any property he desires. He had already discovered a particular plot of ground that had a cave on it and responded in verses 7-9 that he wanted to pay the full price for it.

The owner of that piece of property, Ephron the Hittite, again offered the property for free (vv. 10-11) but Abraham refused (vv. 12-13). Ephron answered that it was worth 400 shekels of silver, but that this amount was nothing between them. This apparently was the way that bartering was accomplished because the next verse says that Abraham “listened” to Ephron and paid the purchase price.

The legal side of the deal was then taken care of at the gate of Ephron’s city, the place where all official business was done in public. Abraham buried Sarah’s body in the cave and the Bible notes that the property was deeded to Abraham as a gravesite for his family.

One importance of this passage is that it indicates the priority of proper burial. We believe it is important to treat the human body with respect for it is part of God’s creation of man in the image of God. Some are buried at sea and others on land. The practice of cremation is not endorsed by the Scriptures, though if one is cremated or dies in a terrible fire, this does not prevent God from resurrecting that person. Note that burning of bodies, as in the trash dump in the Valley of Hinnom, is a sign of reproach and shame. Bodies left out for the dogs and vultures (2 Kings 9:36-37, Jer. 34:20), or even hung on a tree, indicated a curse on such people (Deut. 21:23, Joshua 8:29; cf. Acts 5:30, 10:39, Gal. 3:13).

This passage also indicates the validity of long-term property purchases. Property ownership was known and practiced even in these days, about 4000 years ago. The property was held for at least three (long) generations.

II. Finding a Wife for Isaac, ch. 24

Prov. 18:22 says, “He who finds a wife finds a good thing, and obtains favor from the LORD.” (Gentlemen, see Prov. 5:18 and 19:14 for other verses about the blessing of a good wife.) In Genesis 24, the storyline is how Isaac “found” Rebekah.

It is indeed a beautiful account, one of the most emotionally stirring in the Bible, particularly at verses 63-67. It begins by telling us about Abraham’s old age and how the Lord had blessed him in all things. This is indicative of the fulfillment of the covenant in 12:2 where God promised to bless Abraham. He had done as He promised!

A. The Commissioning of the Servant, 24:2-9

The second scene is that Abraham called his servant and made him promise to find a wife from among Abraham’s relatives, rather than from among the Canaanites. Putting “your hand under my thigh” indicates the taking of a solemn oath. Abraham also requires him to NOT take Isaac out of the land in which he dwells.

Note that there were certain qualifications to this wife: 1) she had to be from among close relatives of Abraham; 2) she had to be willing to come back to the land of Canaan. If she was not willing, then the servant was released from the oath.

Further note that this whole incident is not normative for us (that is, it is not *directly* applicable) because Abraham knew from God that He would send an angel on ahead to make sure things went well. In addition, Isaac had to have a wife as part of the Abrahamic covenant. No one today is in that kind of situation.

B. The Circumstantial Fleece, 24:10-21

Not knowing how else to proceed, the servant prayed for success and gave a certain set of circumstances to the Lord by which he would know that God was guiding him to success. The girl who happened to be the one who responded in a certain way would be the one for Isaac.

Notice that even though this did occur, the servant in verse 21 was still unsure as to whether the Lord had prospered his journey. The two qualifications listed above still had to be met. He did not know who this girl was, nor if she would be willing to go.

C. The Contractual Arrangement of the Marriage, 24:22-53

In verses 22-27, the servant’s first question was answered. Rebekah was from Abraham’s family. She actually invited the servant to come to stay with the family (25, 28-33). He bowed down his head and worshiped the Lord, verses 26-27 say. This is the second occurrence of the word “worship” in the Bible. Notice his posture (bowing down), and that accompanying and as a part of this posture was worship for the Lord. The Lord had led him thus far. But still another question remained.

The servant explained his situation (34-41) and what happened earlier in the day (42-48). Now he came directly to the second question (49-52), which was whether the girl would be allowed to come with him and would be herself willing to do so. An affirmative answer came from the family. So the servant again worshipped God (v. 52).

D. The Coming of the Bride, 24:54-66

After a night of celebration and gifts, the servant wanted to set out the next morning to go home. Rebekah was asked if she was willing to go, and she said she was. The family offered her their blessings, not knowing when they might see her again, if ever.

So Rebekah went along with the servant. When they came near to home, Isaac was out walking in the field at evening time. He may have been meditating on things after the death of his mother Sarah, or the servant’s journey for him, or on the Lord’s promises to his father and to him. In any case, he saw the caravan coming with his bride. What a scene!

E. The Consummation of the Marriage, 24:67

The Bible summarizes the marriage itself and one of its affects: it brought comfort to Isaac after his mom’s passing.

Conclusion

It would be good to consider some principles for finding a marriage partner, for there are not many people who would say the only way to find a wife today follows the exact experience of the servant of Abraham. What are some of these principles?