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Introduction

The age and death of Sarah, Genesis 23:1, Genesis 23:2. Abraham mourns for her, and requests a burial-place from the sons of Heth, Genesis 23:2-4. They freely offer him the choice of all their sepulchers, Genesis 23:5, Genesis 23:6. Abraham refuses to receive any as a free gift, and requests to buy the cave of Machpelah from Ephron, Genesis 23:7-9. Ephron proffers the cave and the field in which it was situated as a free gift unto Abraham, Genesis 23:10, Genesis 23:11. Abraham insists on giving its value in money, Genesis 23:12, Genesis 23:13. Ephron at last consents, and names the sum of four hundred shekels, Genesis 23:14, Genesis 23:15. Abraham weighs him the money in the presence of the people; in consequence of which the cave, the whole field, trees, etc., are made sure to him and his family for a possession, Genesis 23:16-18. The transaction being completed, Sarah is buried in the cave, Genesis 23:19. The sons of Heth ratify the bargain, Genesis 23:20.

Verse 1

And Sarah was a hundred and seven and twenty years old - It is worthy of remark that Sarah is the only woman in the sacred writings whose age, death, and burial are distinctly noted. And she has been deemed worthy of higher honor, for St. Paul, Galatians 4:22, Galatians 4:23, makes her a type of the Church of Christ; and her faith in the accomplishment of God's promise, that she should have a son, when all natural probabilities were against it, is particularly celebrated in the Epistle to the Hebrews, Hebrews 11:11. Sarah was about ninety-one years old when Isaac was born, and she lived thirty-six years after, and saw him grown up to man's estate. With Sarah the promise of the incarnation of Christ commenced, though a comparatively obscure prophecy of it had been delivered to Eve, Genesis 3:15; and with Mary it terminated, having had its exact completion. Thus God put more honor upon these two women than upon all the daughters of Eve besides. Sarah's conception of Isaac was supernatural; she had passed the age and circumstances in which it was possible, naturally speaking, to have a child; therefore she laughed when the promise was given, knowing that the thing was impossible, because it had ceased to be with her after the manner of women. God allows this natural impossibility, and grants that the thing must be the effect of Divine interposition; and therefore asks, Is any thing too hard for God? The physical impossibility was increased in the case of Mary, she having no connection with man; but the same power interposed as in the case of Sarah: and we find that when all aptitude for natural procreation was gone, Sarah received strength to conceive seed, and bore a son, from whom, in a direct line, the Messiah, the Savior of the world, was to descend; and through this same power we find a virgin conceiving and bearing a son against all natural impossibilities. Every thing is supernatural in the births both of the type and antitype; can it be wondered at then, if the spiritual offspring of the Messiah must have a supernatural birth likewise? hence the propriety of that saying, Unless a man be born again - born from above - born, not only of water, but of the Holy Ghost, he cannot see the kingdom of God. These may appear hard sayings, and those who are little in the habit of considering spiritual things may exclaim, It is enthusiasm! Who can bear it? Such things cannot possibly be. To such persons I have only to say, God hath spoken. This is sufficient for those who credit his being and his Bible; nor is there any thing too hard for him. He, by whose almighty power, Sarah had strength to conceive and bear a son in her old age, and by whose miraculous interference a virgin conceived, and the man Christ Jesus was born of her, can by the same power transform the sinful soul, and cause it to bear the image of the heavenly as it has borne the image of the earthly.

Verse 2

Sarah died in Kirjath-arba - Literally in the city of the four. Some suppose this place was called the city of the four because it was the burial place of Adam, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; others, because according to the opinion of the rabbins, Eve was buried there. with Sarah, Rebekah, and Leah. But it seems evidently to have had its name from a Canaanite, one of the Anakim, probably called Arba (for the text, Joshua 14:14, does not actually say this was his name), who was the chief of the four brothers who dwelt there; the names of the others being Sheshai, Ahiman, and Talmi. See Judges 1:10. These three were destroyed by the tribe of Judah; probably the other had been previously dead.

Abraham came to mourn for Sarah - From Genesis 22:19 of the preceding chapter it appears that Abraham had settled at Beer-sheba; and here we find that Sarah died at Hebron, which was about twenty-four miles distant from Beersheba. For the convenience of feeding his numerous flocks, Abraham had probably several places of temporary residence, and particularly one at Beer-sheba, and another at Hebron; and it is likely that while he sojourned at Beersheba, Sarah died at Hebron; and his coming to mourn and weep for her signifies his coming from the former to the latter place on the news of her death.

Verse 3

Abraham stood up from before his dead - He had probably sat on the ground some days in token of sorrow, as

the custom then was, (see Tobit 2:12, 13; Isaiah 47:1; and Genesis 37:35); and when this time was finished he arose and began to treat about a burying place.

Verse 4

I am a stranger and a sojourner - It appears from Hebrews 11:13-16; 1 Peter 2:11, that these words refer more to the state of his mind than of his body. He felt that he had no certain dwelling place, and was seeking by faith a city that had foundations.

Give me a possession of a burying place - It has been remarked that in different nations it was deemed ignominious to be buried in another's ground; probably this prevailed in early times in the east, and it may be in reference to a sentiment of this kind that Abraham refuses to accept the offer of the children of Heth to bury in any of their sepulchers, and earnestly requests them to sell him one, that he might bury his wife in a place that he could claim as his own.

Verse 6

Thou art a mighty prince - אֲדֹנָיִם אֱלֹהִים (nesi Elohim), a prince of God - a person whom we know to be Divinely favored, and whom, in consequence, we deeply respect and reverence.

Verse 8

Entreat for me to Ephron - Abraham had already seen the cave and field, and finding to whom they belonged, and that they would answer his purpose, came to the gate of Hebron, where the elders of the people sat to administer justice, etc., and where bargains and sales were made and witnessed, and having addressed himself to the elders, among whom Ephron was, though it appears he was not personally known to Abraham, he begged them to use their influence with the owner of the cave and field to sell it to him, that it might serve him and his family for a place of sepulture.

Verse 10

And Ephron dwelt among the children of Heth - And Ephron יוֹשֶׁבֶת (yosheb), was sitting among the children of Heth, but, as was before conjectured, was personally unknown to Abraham; he therefore answered for himself, making a free tender of the field, etc., to Abraham, in the presence of all the people, which amounted to a legal conveyance of the whole property to the patriarch.

Verse 13

If thou wilt give it - Instead of, if thou wilt give it, we should read, But if thou wilt sell it, I will give thee money for the field; כֶּסֶף (keseph), silver, not coined money, for it is not probable that any such was then in use.

Verse 15

The land is worth four hundred shekels of silver - Though the words is worth are not in the text, yet they are necessarily expressed here to adapt the Hebrew to the idiom of our tongue. A shekel, according to the general opinion, was equal to two shillings and sixpence; but according to Dr. Prideaux, whose estimate I shall follow, three shillings English, four hundred of which are equal to sixty pounds sterling; but it is evident that a certain weight is intended, and not a coin, for in Genesis 23:16 it is said, And Abraham weighed כֶּסֶף טָהוֹר (vaiyishkol), the silver, and hence it appears that this weight itself passed afterwards as a current coin, for the word כֶּסֶף is not only used to express a coin or piece of silver, but also to weigh; See note on Genesis 20:16.

Verse 16

Current with the merchant - אֲדָמָה (adama), passing to or with the traveler - such as was commonly used by those who traveled about with merchandise of any sort. The word signifies the same as hawker or peddler among us.

Verse 17

All the trees that were in the field - It is possible that all these were specified in the agreement.

Verse 20

And the field, etc. were made sure - אֲדָמָה (vaiyakom), were established, caused to stand; the whole transaction having been regulated according to all the forms of law then in use.

1. In this transaction between Abraham and the sons of Heth concerning the cave and field of Machpelah, we have the earliest account on record of the purchase of land. The simplicity, openness, and candour on both sides cannot be too much admired.

2. Sarah being dead, Abraham being only a sojourner in that land, shifting from place to place for the mere

purpose of pasturing his flocks, and having no right to any part of the land, wished to purchase a place in which he might have the continual right of sepulture. For this purpose, 1. He goes to the gate of the city, the place where, in all ancient times, justice was administered, and bargains and sales concluded, and where for these purposes the elders of the people sat. 2. He there proposes to buy the cave known by the name of the Cave of Machpelah, the cave of the turning or the double cave, for a burying place for his family. 3. To prevent him from going to any unnecessary expense, the people with one voice offer him the privilege of burying his wife in any of their sepulchers; this appearing to them to be no more than the common rights of hospitality and humanity required. 4. Abraham, intent on making a purchase, Ephron, the owner of the field and cave, values them at four hundred shekels, but at the same time wishes Abraham to receive the whole as a gift. 5. Abraham refuses the gift and weighs down the silver specified. 6. The people who enter in at the gate, i.e., the inhabitants coming from or going to their ordinary occupations in the country, witness the transaction, and thus the conveyance to Abraham is made sure without the intervention of those puzzlers of civil affairs by whose tricks and chicanery property often becomes insecure, and right and succession precarious and uncertain. But this censure does not fall on lawyers properly so called, who are men of honor, and whose office, in every well-regulated state, is as useful as it is respectable. But the accumulation and complex nature of almost all modern systems of law puzzle even justice herself, and often induce decisions by which truth falls in the streets and equity goes backwards. In the first ages of mankind, suspicion, deceit, and guile seem to have had a very limited influence. Happy days of primitive simplicity! When shall they return?

3. We often hear of the rudeness and barbarity of the primitive ages, but on what evidence? Every rule of politeness that could be acted upon in such a case as that mentioned here, is brought into full practice. Is it possible to read the simple narration in this place without admiring the amiable, decent, and polite conduct displayed on both sides? Had even Lord Chesterfield read this account, his good sense would have led him to propose it as a model in all transactions between man and his fellows. There is neither awkward, stiff formality on the one hand, nor frippery or affectation on the other. Decent respect, good sense, good nature, and good breeding, are all prominently displayed. And how highly laudable and useful is all this! A pedant or a boor on either side might have destroyed the simplicity of the whole transaction; the one by engendering caution and suspicion, and the other by exciting disgust. In all such transactions the beau and the boor are equally to be avoided.

From the first no sincerity can be expected, and the manners of the latter render him intolerable. The religion of the Bible recommends and inculcates orderly behavior, as well as purity of heart and life. They who, under the sanction of religion, trample under foot the decent forms of civil respect, supposing that because they are religious they have a right to be rude, totally mistake the spirit of Christianity, for love or charity (the soul and essence of that religion) becometh not itself unseemly. Every attentive reader of the thirteenth chapter of St. Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians, will clearly discern that the description of true religion given in that place applies as forcibly to good breeding as to inward and outward holiness. What lessons of honesty, decent respect, and good manners could a sensible man derive from Abraham treating with the sons of Heth for the cave of Machpelah, and William Penn treating with the American Indians for the tract of land now called Pennsylvania! I leave others to draw the parallel, and to show how exactly the conduct and spirit of patriarch the first were exemplified in the conduct and spirit of patriarch the second. Let the righteous be had in everlasting remembrance!