Chayei Sarah –“Life of Sarah” Genesis 23-25:18

Haftorah: 1 Kings 1:1-31

Brit Chadashah: 1 Corinthians 15:50-57, John 14:26, 15:26, 16:13-15

A Brief overview of Genesis Chapters 23-25: In Chapter 23, there is the death of Sarah followed by Abraham securing a burial site at the cave of Machpelah by purchasing it from Ephron, the Hittite. In Chapter 24, Abraham sends out his servant to find a wife for his son, Isaac, who is Rebekah…and upon arrival to Isaac, Rebekah becomes Isaac’s wife.

In Chapter 25, Abraham marries another wife followed later and the Torah portion concludes with his passing away in which Ishmael and Isaac bury him in the cave of Machpelah that Abraham purchased back in Genesis chapter 23. At the very end of this Torah portion, there is a genealogy of the descendants of Ishmael.

Let’s talk about the significance of the burial cave at Machpelah: First off, It is interesting to note that the Cave of Machpelah (in which Abraham bought -Gen 23) along with the threshing floor which became the building site of the temple in Jerusalem (in which King David bought -1Chr 21:24-25) and the parcel of land in Shechem (in which Jacob bought -Gen 33:18-19) where the sons of Israel eventually buried Joseph’s bones (Joshua 24:32) are areas that are recorded “bill of sale” in the Bible. Unfortunately, these three places (for the most part) are under Arab control. Jews are either restricted or banned from praying 1.) Inside the cave of Machpelah (Hebron) where the Tombs of the patriarchs and matriarchs are located, 2.) On the temple mount in Jerusalem, or 3.) In to the city of Shechem. Again, these three areas were clearly purchased fairly, legally, and at full price as recorded in the Bible.

Now regarding the Torah portion: What does it mean when the scriptures say the expression “gathered to your fathers”? In ancient times, when a person died, their relatives would anoint the body and wrap it in layers of linen cloth. This was not to preserve the body but to make the decomposition of the flesh less pungent. A sepulcher or tomb (hewn out from a cave) was generally comprised of 2 sections. Within the 1st section was a table or niche carved into the rock to receive the body. A small hole to the outside, called a “nefesh” (Hebrew word meaning “soul”) hole was also present to allow air to circulate in order to speed up decomposition leaving only the bones remaining. Once this decomposition process was complete, the family of the deceased would enter the tomb, gather up the bones, and stack them with the bones of all their previously deceased relatives. This is where the expression “gathered to your fathers” comes from.

So what relevance does this have with the Torah portion? Had Abraham accepted the “free” proposal of Ephron, the son of Zohar the Hittite among the children of Heth for the property rights to the cave, it would have meant that eventually Sarah’s bones would be gathered among the Canaanite ancestors of Heth. This would not do as Abraham understood that he was called to be separate from the nations. It is for this reason that he remained a sojourner and stranger among them. Abraham did not assimilate into any of the cultures he lived among. Even in death, Sarah would not be gathered unto the Canaanites or Hittites. Abraham therefore paid full price for the property rights to the cave. This separation would likewise become important in Chapter 24 when Abraham sends his servant elsewhere to find a wife for Isaac and forbids him from taking a wife from among the Canaanites. Let us also recall who the Canaanites are: descendants of Ham’s son (Genesis 9:22) and are cursed. Abraham’s line is through the blessed line of Shem. Secondly, Abraham had received the promise and covenant that YHWH would indeed bless him and his seed after him. To allow his son to marry a Canaanite would be mixing the seed.

I’d like to add “one more thing” to all of this in that I believe that one reason for Abraham to purchase a burial place for Sarah and himself in the land of Canaan is so that Abraham’s descendants’ hearts will be forever drawn to this land (Israel). Even though the Canaanites and others currently inhabited the land, Abraham knows that this land has been promised to his descendants forever! (Gen 13:15, Gen 17:8). REFERENCES: Tony Robinson notes