

Genesis 23: Scenes and Structure

“Abraham labors under two disabilities that derive from his status as an alien. He cannot avail himself of local burial facilities without municipal permission, and he cannot acquire land. Second, even if these restrictions were to be overcome, he would still face the problem of procuring an inheritable estate to be used by future generations, for an alien could not normally own land in perpetuity (cf. Lev 25.23). Third, apart from legal problems, there is still to be encountered the reluctance of landowners to part with their property.”

(N. Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary, Genesis*, pp. 156-57)

“We readers have to infer and coordinate a set of three Hittite motives, or rather three levels or layers of motive, one atop the other: Politeness, Politics, and Profits. These three P’s—all secretly alien, if not opposed to the imperative of burial—mark a descending order along various related scales.” 1. TRANSPARENCY: “each veils the next in depth.” 2. SEEMLINESS. 3. SENSES OF “HEAR US, MY LORD”: attention, obedience, understanding. “The uglier the message behind the speaking, the larger the role played by the ‘hearing.’” (M. Sternberg, “Double Cave, Double Talk, in Rosenblatt and Sitterson, eds. *Not in Heaven*, pp. 34-35)

VERSE	PARTICIPANTS BESIDE ABRAHAM	LAND SUBJECT TO NEGOTIATION	TERMS OF TRANSFER	PRICE
1-2	PROBLEM: dead Sarah needs burial but Abraham is “a stranger and an alien” in the land			
v. 3-6	The Hittites	Abraham: “property among you for a burying place” Hittites: “the choicest of our burial places none of us will withhold from you” implicit: “okay, let’s start talking according to our rules”	Abraham: property as a burying place (transfer of ownership in perpetuity), <i>‘achuzzath-qever</i> Hittites: “our burial places” (use of land, not transfer)	Abraham: “give me” Hittites: none stated
v. 7-11	“The Hittites, the people of the land” (<i>le`am ha`arets</i>) Ephron, son of Zohar	Abraham: the cave of Machpelah at the end of “his” field Ephron: “the” field and the cave	Abraham: <i>achuzzath-qever</i> Ephron: implicit: “if we’re talking purchase, then not just the cave!”	Abraham: full price of the cave Ephron: “I give it to you”
v. 12-15	The people of the land Ephron	Abraham: the field Ephron: a piece of land (<i>‘erets</i>) implicit: “this is part of our communal inheritance (and won’t be cheap)!”	<i>Implicitly agreed:</i> a purchase	Abraham: the market price of the field Ephron: 400 shekels
v. 16-18	Ephron The Hittites All who went in at the gate of his city	<i>Agreed:</i> “the field of Ephron in Machpelah, which was to the east of Mamre, the field with the cave that was in it and all the trees that were in the field, throughout its whole area”	<i>Agreed:</i> <i>lemiqrnah</i> (legal purchase for a price)	<i>Agreed:</i> 400 shekels
v. 19-20	Dead Sarah is buried in “the Cave of Couples (or Doubles)” (Machpelah), as will be Abraham (25:9), Isaac, Rebekah, Leah (49:31) and Jacob (50:13)			