

July 18, 2004

Seventh Sunday After Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Sarah's burial in Genesis 23 merits more attention, let me suggest, than it generally gains.

The relative neglect of this story is easy to understand. Less dramatic than the sacrifice of Isaac, which comes right before it, the narrative about Sarah is also less romantic than the wooing of Rebecca, which immediately follows it. To the former it is no match as drama, because the quiet death of an old person is less exciting than the threatened death of a young person. And though Abraham's burial of Sarah is hardly without romance, the tone of this romance is subdued, subtle, more nuanced than the younger love of Isaac and Rebekah. By these criteria, then, Sarah's interment represents a pause, as it were, a respite or slowing down in the Abraham saga. For these reasons it may not especially stand out in the memory of Bible-readers.

However, I believe there are two reasons why Sarah's burial deserves more explicit attention. First, the story offers an intriguing psychological portrait of Abraham. Second, it sews a significant theological stitch in the Bible's narrative pattern.

Let us begin with the story's psychological interest in Abraham. A useful way to approach this subject, I think, is by contrasting the figure of Abraham in this account with that in Genesis 18. This comparison is amply warranted, inasmuch as both narratives describe Abraham engaged in a "negotiation."

In the earlier story, when Abraham learns of the Lord's plan to destroy Sodom, he fears for the fate of his nephew Lot, a resident of the city. With an enviable but bewildering optimism he endeavors to change the Lord's mind, engaging Him in what is arguably the boldest enterprise of "haggling" ever recorded. No attentive reader will forget how Abraham resolutely lowers the original price, as it were, arguing the sum of required just men from fifty down to ten. The bargaining ends only when the Lord Himself, as though desperate of winning the arbitration, suddenly breaks it off!

In Genesis 23 all is different. After Abraham has lain prostrate for a while before the dead body of his wife, he rises, sobered by sorrow, and approaches a local Hittite chieftain in order to obtain a piece of land wherein to bury the cherished companion of his long life. He describes himself now as "a foreigner and visitor," designations rendered doubly significant in the context of death. Abraham is solemn and deferential. There is no haggling now. His whole demeanor is one of gravity and respect. Sarah is gone. What else matters?

Finally, for a small field containing a cave Abraham pays the exorbitant price of four hundred shekels of silver. (In 1 Kings 16:24 Omri pays only six thousand shekels of silver for the entire site of the large city of Samaria.) A man does not haggle over the price of his wife's tomb. After such a loss, nothing else is worth much. The old man treads slowly out to the cave, bearing Sarah's body and a lifetime of intimate love.

Second, the story of Sarah's burial in Genesis 23 advances the theological theme of Israel's taking possession of the Promised Land. Up to this point in the biblical history, let us recall, Abraham owned no property in Canaan, "not even enough to set his foot on" (Acts 7:5). With the purchase of the burial cave of Machpelah, however, his family actually acquires its first piece of real estate in the Holy Land. This portion of ground becomes the initial installment of Israel's inheritance, the germinal redemption of God's earlier pledge, "To your descendents I have given this land" (Genesis 15:18).

In this burial ground an inter-generational transmission of ownership is now established, a "tradition," a "handing on," of Israel's historical identity. The aged flesh of Sarah is but the first deposit the Chosen People adds to the soil of Canaan. Abraham will presently join her at Machpelah, and in due course Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Leah too, will lie down in the tombs beside them. Here the ancestors of the Chosen People will return-"dust to dust"-to the earth from which they were taken.

The grave is the place, after all, where time is fixed, durably fused with space. The complex, shadowing mists of the past are coupled forever to the plain but sturdy permanence of the soil. Everything is settled. In the graveyard history and geography become one.

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