

FIRST, A WORD ABOUT NUMBERS | GENESIS 23:1

One might ask why Sarah's age, 127, and indeed all numbers of the Scripture, was spelled out in such meticulous fashion. The answer is more mundane than mystical but gives insight into a relatively common method of Scriptural interpretation called *gematria*.

The reason the Scripture says that Sarah was **an hundred and seven and twenty years old** is that the Hebrew language had no way of writing 127 in any other manner, with the exception of the word order. There were no *numerals* in the Hebrew language. It was *much later* in history that languages began to use symbols for numerals. And it was only after the close of the Hebrew Scriptures, during the Greek period, that letters came to be used as numerals.

This sheds some light on the practice of using *gematria* in Biblical interpretation. *Gematria* is the practice of using the numerical value of a word to add interpretive insight into the passage. It can also be used to find a *word value* of a number.

Many fanciful interpretations have been claimed based on *gematria*. For our purposes, suffice it to say that *all gematria using Hebrew was introduced into Hebrew thought with the Greek philosophers, long after the Hebrew Scriptures had been written in their entirety*. It would be foolish, then, to think that a *gematria*-based value has interpretive value.

The well-known Rabbinical teacher Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra once said, "*Scripture does not resort to gematria. Whoever wants to, can [by using it] get any name to mean anything. Names are just names.*"¹

A FIRST IN DEATH | GENESIS 23:2-4

The Jewish interpretation is that the story of Isaac is immediately followed by the death of Sarah because the one caused the other. We do see that Abraham was not present with Sarah when she died (for Abraham had got to Beer-Sheba after the Isaac incident (Gen. 22:19).

Though many people had died in the Scriptures up to this point, this is the first time it is recorded that someone *mourned* and *wept* for the deceased. Whether Abraham is giving the normal grief of a loving husband or whether he is crying over the tragedies of the last few episodes in their lives is unknown.

Not only is the death of Sarah the first time we read of *mourning for the dead*, but also the first time we see hint of a *eulogy* (v. 3) and of a *burial*. These, of course, have become a staple of "*the business of death* for Western Civilization.

THE BURIAL PLACE | GENESIS 23:5-20

Abraham used to live in Hebron, but he had never taken action to *own* any of the land. Now he is obligated to meet with **the children of Heth**, otherwise unknown to us, to all-but beg for a burial place, while the body of Sarah lays in state. It seems, in fact, unusual that verses 5-23, most of the chapter, is given to the discussion of the burial place, and before it is finished, we must ask why the Bible is so concerned that we know the details of at the transaction.

Abraham is given unbelievable respect by the local council. The term **mighty prince** can be translated as *a prince of God* (as in the KJV translator notes). The council offers any **sepulchre** of the area, at no charge, to **bury thy dead**. Abraham will not accept the offer, however, and for good reason. The tombs of the Hittites would always be Hittite tombs! Abraham wanted something that *was something new, for Sarah and the covenant family which would receive the Promised Land*.

Abraham desires a specific property, **the cave of Machpelah**, literally *the double cave* along with the field it is in, **for as much money as it is worth**.

It seems that Ephron is willing to *give* the cave and the field, but Abraham will hear nothing of it, insisting on a purchase price. Ephron declares, with exaggeration it seems, that **the land is worth four hundred shekels of silver; what is that betwixt me and thee?** (v. 15). But Abraham immediately **weighed to Ephron the silver** (v. 16), all in public view, using **current money with the merchant** (v. 16)., that is, accepted and legitimate coinage, not a promissory note.

Twice in the text we are told that the purchase was **made sure** in a public manner (v. 17, 20). Despite this, the city of Hebron and the cave itself have been the site of some of the bloodiest battles for control/access of any of the sites of historic Jewish significance.

In his lifetime, this is the only piece of property of the *Promised Land* that was owned by Abraham.

¹ <https://mosaicmagazine.com/observation/uncategorized/2016/05/the-gematria-of-hillary-clinton-and-donald-trump/>. Accessed February 18, 2023.