



Conducted by
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A question concerning the tombs of the 'Fathers' of Israel

During a recent conversation, a brother drew my attention to an apparent contradiction concerning land-purchase of Abraham and Jacob, and the burial-places of Abraham, Jacob and the 'Fathers'.

The passages involved are: Genesis 23:19; Genesis 33:19; Acts 7:16; Joshua 24:32ff.

Gen. 23 is the *only* record of a land-purchase made by Abraham and it relates to the purchase, from Ephron the Hittite, of the field *near Hebron* containing the cave in which the body of Sarah was buried. This tomb, which today is *in Hebron*, the town having expanded, became the burial place of Abraham himself, followed by Jacob and Leah, and Isaac and Rebekah (Gen. 49:31 and 50:13).

Gen. 33 *tells* us that *Jacob* bought a piece of land at *Shechem*, from the sons of Hamor, and this purchase is confirmed by Joshua 24:32, where mention is made of the burial of Joseph at Shechem.

Acts 7, however, is the passage which creates confusion in the minds of some, because Stephen says that Joseph *'and our fathers'* were buried at *Shechem 'in the tomb*

which Abraham bought from the sons of Hamor,' and the question is: do we have a contradiction here? Has Stephen made a mistake? The answer is No! There is no contradiction and no mistake!

The difficulty disappears when we understand that, when Stephen spoke of *our fathers,*' he was not referring to the Patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who most certainly were buried at Hebron, but to the fathers of the Twelve Tribes (Acts 7:8).

Notice also, that in v. 12 of that chapter Stephen says that Jacob himself, and *'our fathers,'* died.

Jacob died first and was taken back to Canaan to be buried at *Hebron,* as he had requested (Gen. 50:13).

Later, Joseph died, the only one of the twelve sons of Jacob whose burial is actually recorded, and, many years later, at the time of the Exodus his bones were taken back to Canaan and buried at *Shechem* in the piece of land which Jacob had given to him (Gen. 48:22).

This is what Joseph had requested his brothers to do, and it is perfectly conceivable that the rest of 'the fathers,' all of whom died in Egypt, made the same request following Joseph's example, because they, also, would have no desire to remain in Egypt but would ask to be buried in the Promised Land.

This means that Stephen is simply stating that *the fathers of the twelve tribes* were buried at *Shechem,* and therefore there is no contradiction.

The only person who says otherwise is Josephus, the Jewish soldier who wrote the 'History of the Jews.' He says that the *'sons of Jacob were buried at Hebron* (Book 2, ch. 8:2).

But Josephus was inaccurate. There are only six people buried in the Cave of Machpelah and they are those already mentioned. Today, the 'Mosque of Abraham,' which was originally a Christian church-building, covers the entrance to the cave. The tombs, to which no one is allowed access, lie beneath the building, and are represented inside the Mosque itself by six symbolic tombs. As for the Tombs of the Twelve Patriarchs; Jerome testifies in his Epistle 86, that even in his days they were shown at *Shechem.*

If we wonder how Josephus could make such a 'mistake,' perhaps the reason is not difficult to find. In his days, Shechem had become part of Samaria. Originally that was not the case. Shechem had been an ancient Hebrew sanctuary, with very strong associations with Abraham.

1. It had been his first stopping place when he came to the land of Canaan, and had built an altar there, and it was here that God first appeared to him (Gen. 12:6).

2. Shechem is where Jacob had settled after his return from Haran in Mesopotamia, and there he had bought a piece of land (Gen. 33).

3. Joseph's brothers had actually herded their flocks at Shechem before going down into Egypt (Gen. 37:12-14).

4. Shechem had been allocated to Ephraim at the Conquest of Canaan, and had been made a City of Refuge (Josh. 20:7).

5. It had been the first capital of all Israel (1st Kings 12:11).

6. In the New Testament it appears as Sychar, where Jacob's Well was located (John 4). It is easy, therefore, to see that the place would be sacred to the Israelites.

However, when the Northern Kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrians in 711 B.C., the area was re-populated by foreigners moved in by the conquerors, and Shechem became the centre of worship for the 'Samaritans', who, having been denied the privilege of helping to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem, built their own Temple on near-by Mount Gerizim.

Given the feeling that the Jews later had for all things 'Samaritan,' it is not

surprising that, when writing his 'History', Josephus should close his eyes to the fact that the fathers of the tribes of Israel were buried in Samaritan territory - namely at Shechem.

But, the fact remains, that Shechem was always a more prominent place than Hebron.

Incidentally, there is no doubt that when Stephen mentioned the fact that the Fathers were buried in 'Samaritan' Shechem, this would anger his listeners even more!

A SECOND PROBLEM ARISES FROM THE PASSAGES TO WHICH I HAVE REFERRED

As we have seen, Abraham's association with Shechem was earlier than his connection with Hebron, and it is possible to build up a picture of ownership of that piece of land at Shechem, before *Jacob bought it*.

Genesis 48:22 records that Jacob gave to Joseph 'one shechem' - 'one mountain slope', or 'one portion' - which, he said, he '*took from the hand*' of the Amorites '*with my bow and with my sword*'. The expression, '*took from the hand*', means '*re-claimed*', and therefore he was not thinking of the purchase recorded in ch.33.

Remember that Abraham built an altar at Shechem, and that in itself implies *ownership*, because he would never have erected an altar on land which belonged to someone else.

What Jacob had done was to re-assert by force of arms, his claim to land, which had once belonged to Abraham. That land at Shechem had very special significance to him, because of its religious family associations, but in the intervening time, the Amorites who had entered Canaan had occupied it.

Then, after '*taking it from the hand of the Amorites*' Jacob had diplomatically, and as an act of reconciliation, *enlarged* his holding by purchasing more land, and this is the purchase recorded in Gen. 33.

It was because of this sacred significance of this land that he singled it out as a special gift to Joseph, and why, later, Joseph requested that, when God delivered His people from Egypt, his bones should be taken and buried at Shechem.

One final point: Gen. 22 tells how Abraham made the journey to Mount Moriah in order to offer up Isaac. The mountain overlooks the Plain of Moreh, where the Oak of Moreh stood, (Gen. 12:2) where Abraham erected his first altar *and where Shechem was located*.

Thus, Abraham knew well the place to which God instructed him to take Isaac.

The mountain which overlooked Shechem and the Plain of Moreh is Mount Gerizim, on which the Samaritans built their temple.

We can surely appreciate that, for Abraham to travel so far to fulfil the command of God argues that he had, originally, consecrated an altar there, and had a possession there.

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