

Joseph

TRAFFICKED

A Moving Story

WESLEYS' THOUGHTS

“Where is the justice of inflicting the severest evils, on those who have done us no wrong? Of depriving those that never injured us in word or deed, of every comfort of life? Of tearing them from their native country, and depriving them of liberty itself? To which an *Angolan*, has the same natural right as an *Englishman*, and on which he sets as high a value? Yea where is the justice of taking away the lives of innocent, inoffensive men? Murdering thousands of them in their own land, by the hands of their own countrymen: Many thousands, year after year, on shipboard, and then casting them like dung into the sea! And tens of thousands in that cruel slavery, to which they are so unjustly reduced?”

Extract from the Journal of John Wesley (1703-1791)



BIBLE PASSAGE | GENESIS 37

“...²⁶ Then Judah said to his brothers, “What profit is it if we slay our brother and conceal his blood? ²⁷ Come, let us sell him to the Ish’maelites, and let not our hand be upon him, for he is our brother, our own flesh.” And his brothers heeded him. ²⁸ Then Mid’ianite traders passed by; and they drew Joseph up and lifted him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ish’maelites for twenty shekels of silver; and they took Joseph to Egypt...”



DISCUSSION

The whole chapter needs to be read to provide the context – and then perhaps the follow-up in chapters 39 onward. The story of the Abrahamic dynasty running through the greater part of the Book of Genesis is the match of any modern soap opera in the intensity, and rawness, of the depiction of human relationships.

Family disputes involving the worst kinds of jealousy, deception and even violence come to a head in chapter 37. Murder is in the air among Joseph's brothers. We are told that Reuben dissuades his brothers from murder, and indeed hatches a plan to save Joseph so that he can be returned to their father. But he is thwarted when the brothers see the opportunity of making a quick buck from passing slave traders. It will be over 20 years (and eight chapters of the book!) before Jacob is released from the anguish of believing that his beloved son has been killed.

So Joseph is sold on. Do the brothers profit? There is confusion in the narrative, with the likelihood of two different versions being welded together. The text as it stands suggests that Joseph is sneaked away by the passing Midianite traders while the brothers' backs are turned. He is sold on to Ishmaelite traders, with a hint of unresolved business from the division two generations before between Sarah-Isaac and Hagar-Ishmael. Finally he reaches Egypt, where a whole new phase of the story begins: more generations later, the sceptre of slavery will rear its ugly head again.

But what are the echoes of this particular episode? We still hear of families selling their children into slavery. Not always intentionally: the parents in desperately poor villages in India or Vietnam or West Africa, duped by visiting agents into believing that their daughter will find a good job in the city or their son will be a great footballer. The outcome may be prostitution in Italy or underpaid work in a car-wash or on a cannabis farm in England. Much chance they have of following Joseph's path to a prestigious government job!

The Anti-Slavery Society seemed to be an anachronism as I grew up. Why did it still exist two hundred years after the 'abolition' of the slave trade? Its renaming as Anti-Slavery International in 1990 was part of the process of bringing modern slavery and trafficking to the world's attention. We are reminded that enslavement has been a part of human inter-action from the earliest times, and that the trans-Atlantic slave trade was a particularly awful but not unique manifestation of the evil of which we are capable. Each generation has to face up to its responsibility to protect the weakest and most vulnerable.

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Some say we devalue the evil of the trans-Atlantic slave trade by talking of modern slavery. Do you agree?
- Does the acceptance by eg Paul of slavery as a fact of life affect the way we read passages such as Ephesians 6,5; 1 Timothy 6,1-3; Titus 2, 9-10.
- The Greek word 'doulos' is variously translated as 'servant' or 'slave'. Does the translation used affect our understanding of Jesus' ministry?
- Can good come out of evil? Does Joseph's ability to save his family from famine all those years later lessen in any way the appalling nature of his sale into slavery?
- Verse 25 "Then they sat down to eat." How easy it is for life to go on as normal when terrible things are happening.