

The sale of Joseph in Genesis 37 and contemporary human trafficking: A hermeneutics of appropriation

Temba T. Rugwiji

The Independent Institute of Education, Varsity College, Pretoria

tembarugwiji@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9080-9908>

Abstract

This article examines the sale of Joseph in Genesis 37 as a form of human commodification within the socio-historical context of the ancient Near East and explores its relevance to contemporary human trafficking through the lens of Hermeneutics of Appropriation (HA). Rather than equating the ancient practice directly with modern human trafficking, the study recognises the historical and conceptual distinctions between the two phenomena while identifying important points of convergence concerning exploitation, forced displacement, loss of agency and the commodification of human beings. Employing close textual analysis informed by postcolonial insights from Said, Spivak and Bhabha, the article investigates how power, domination and vulnerability are reflected in Joseph's sale by his brothers and subsequent transfer into Egypt. Attention is given to the socio-economic, familial and political dimensions of the narrative, highlighting the experiences of individuals subjected to systems of oppression and exploitation. Through HA, the study bridges the ancient text and contemporary realities, demonstrating how the Joseph narrative can contribute to ongoing discussions on human dignity, justice and the protection of vulnerable persons in contexts affected by human trafficking. The article argues that Genesis 37 offers valuable theological and ethical resources for confronting contemporary forms of human exploitation while maintaining sensitivity to the historical distinctiveness of the biblical world.

Keywords

Joseph; Genesis 37; human commodification; sale of persons; human trafficking; HA; postcolonial biblical interpretation; justice; human dignity; exploitation

Introduction

Human trafficking remains one of the most serious human rights challenges of the contemporary world. It involves the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons through coercion, deception or abuse of vulnerability for purposes of exploitation (Gallagher, 2010:29–31). Victims of human trafficking are frequently subjected to forced labour, sexual exploitation, domestic servitude and other forms of dehumanising treatment. Although human trafficking is generally understood as a modern legal and socio-political category, the commodification and sale of human beings have long histories that predate contemporary definitions and international legal frameworks. As Bales (1999:1–5) argues, while the structures and mechanisms of exploitation have evolved, the treatment of human beings as commodities remains a persistent feature of many societies. The Hebrew Bible contains numerous accounts of slavery, servitude, captivity and the sale of persons. However, it would be historically inaccurate to equate these ancient practices directly with contemporary human trafficking. The social, legal and economic realities of the ancient Near East differed significantly from those of the modern world. Nevertheless, certain biblical narratives portray circumstances in which individuals were deprived of agency, treated as commodities and transferred for economic gain. One such narrative is the sale of Joseph by his brothers in Genesis 37. Rather than examining human trafficking across the entire Hebrew Bible, this study focuses specifically on Joseph's sale as a case study through which questions of exploitation, commodification and human dignity may be explored. Genesis 37 narrates how Joseph's brothers, motivated by jealousy and resentment, conspired against him and eventually sold him to a caravan of Ishmaelite/Midianite traders travelling to Egypt (Gen. 37:25–28). The narrative depicts Joseph not merely as a victim of familial betrayal but also as a person whose life became subject to commercial exchange. Although the text does not describe "human trafficking" in the contemporary sense, it presents an instance in which a human being is commodified and transferred for profit. This feature of the narrative provides a significant point of engagement for contemporary discussions concerning the exploitation and commercialisation of vulnerable persons. Scholars of the Hebrew Bible have long examined the institutions of slavery and servitude within ancient Israel and the broader

ancient Near East. Yee (2003:112–118), Collins (2005:73–79) and Coogan (2017:156–161) observe that systems of servitude were embedded within the social and economic structures of ancient societies and often emerged through warfare, indebtedness, displacement or social vulnerability. Similarly, Osiek (1992:35) notes that slavery functioned as a pervasive institution throughout the ancient world and must be understood within its historical context. Martin (2010:89) further argues that ancient economic and legal systems were deeply interconnected with practices of servitude that supplied labour for agricultural and domestic production. These studies provide an important historical backdrop for understanding the Joseph narrative, while also highlighting the need to distinguish ancient forms of servitude from modern trafficking networks. This article employs HA¹ as its primary interpretive framework. HA recognises that biblical texts emerged within particular historical and cultural settings while simultaneously affirming their continuing relevance for contemporary readers. Rather than collapsing the distance between ancient and modern contexts, HA encourages a critical dialogue between text and context. It asks how ancient narratives may be ethically appropriated to address present realities without ignoring their historical particularity. In the present study, HA facilitates a responsible engagement with Genesis 37 by allowing the Joseph narrative to speak to contemporary concerns regarding exploitation, commodification and the violation of human dignity. The study is further informed by postcolonial insights derived from Said (1978), Spivak (1988) and Bhabha (1994). Postcolonial criticism exposes the operations of power, domination and marginalisation embedded within cultural narratives and social structures. Such a perspective is particularly useful in examining how vulnerable individuals are represented within biblical texts and how systems of power function to suppress agency and reinforce inequality. When combined with HA, postcolonial criticism enables an interpretation that not only critiques oppressive structures within the narrative but also explores possibilities for resistance, restoration and justice. The purpose of this article is therefore twofold. First, it investigates the sale of Joseph in Genesis 37 as a narrative of human commodification within the socio-

1 For further reading, see Temba Rugwiji, “The quest for hermeneutics of appropriation as a thematic approach for critical biblical interpretation.” *HTS Theological Studies* 76/1 (2020), a5392. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i1.5392>.

historical context of the ancient Near East. Second, it appropriates the narrative to contemporary discussions on human trafficking and related forms of exploitation. By placing the ancient text in dialogue with present-day concerns, the study seeks to demonstrate how Genesis 37 contributes to broader conversations about human dignity, justice and the protection of vulnerable persons. In doing so, the article argues that the Joseph narrative remains a valuable theological and ethical resource for confronting contemporary forms of human exploitation while respecting the historical distinctiveness of the biblical world.

Theoretical and hermeneutical framework

This study is primarily grounded in HA which serves as the principal interpretive framework through which the narrative of Joseph's sale in Genesis 37 is examined and related to contemporary concerns regarding human trafficking and exploitation. HA recognises that biblical texts emerged within specific historical, cultural and ideological contexts, yet continue to possess interpretive significance for contemporary communities. The approach seeks neither to collapse the distance between the ancient and modern worlds nor to confine biblical meaning exclusively to the past. Rather, it facilitates a critical dialogue between text and context, enabling readers to discern how ancient narratives may be ethically and responsibly appropriated for present-day challenges. In this study, HA provides the methodological bridge between Joseph's experience of commodification in Genesis 37 and contemporary manifestations of human trafficking and human exploitation.

The application of HA is particularly important because the sale of Joseph cannot be equated directly with modern human trafficking. Such an approach would risk imposing contemporary categories onto an ancient text and thereby obscuring its historical distinctiveness. Instead, HA acknowledges both continuity and discontinuity between the biblical narrative and contemporary realities. It allows the interpreter to identify analogous patterns of vulnerability, commodification and abuse while remaining attentive to the social, legal and economic differences that separate the ancient Near East from the modern world. Through this

process, the Joseph narrative becomes a resource for ethical reflection on human dignity, justice and the treatment of vulnerable persons.

To enrich this hermeneutical framework, the study draws on selected insights from postcolonial theory, particularly the works of Said (1978), Spivak (1988) and Bhabha (1994). Postcolonial criticism provides valuable analytical tools for examining the operation of power, domination and marginalisation within biblical texts and their interpretive histories. Rather than functioning as an independent methodology, postcolonial theory serves in this study as a critical lens that complements the broader aims of HA.

Said's (1978) concept of "Othering" is especially relevant for analysing how individuals and groups become marginalised through social and ideological processes. Othering often involves constructing certain persons as inferior, expendable or socially insignificant, thereby legitimising their exclusion or exploitation. Within Genesis 37, Joseph experiences a form of familial and social exclusion that culminates in his commodification and sale. Through the lens of HA, this process may be critically appropriated to illuminate contemporary situations in which vulnerable persons are stripped of dignity and reduced to economic commodities.

Spivak's (1988) concern for the silenced voices of the subaltern further enriches the analysis. Her question, "Can the subaltern speak?" draws attention to those whose experiences are frequently excluded from dominant narratives and structures of power. Although Genesis 37 primarily presents the perspectives of Joseph and his brothers, the narrative also raises broader questions concerning the vulnerability of individuals subjected to the decisions of more powerful actors. Through HA, contemporary readers are encouraged to engage critically with such silences and to consider how modern victims of human trafficking often remain unheard, invisible and socially marginalised.

Bhabha's (1994) notion of hybridity contributes to an understanding of the complex cultural and political environments in which biblical narratives emerged. Ancient Israel existed within a broader world shaped by interaction with powerful neighbouring societies, including Egypt and other imperial powers of the ancient Near East. These interactions influenced social institutions, economic structures and cultural identities.

Bhabha's insights help illuminate how power relations operate within such contexts while also revealing possibilities for resistance, adaptation and transformation. Appropriated through HA, these insights encourage readers to explore how individuals and communities negotiate systems of domination without surrendering their agency and humanity.

The combination of HA and postcolonial criticism provides a framework that is both historically sensitive and ethically engaged. While HA serves as the primary interpretive approach, postcolonial theory offers critical tools for exposing structures of power and marginalisation embedded within the narrative. Together, they enable a reading of Genesis 37 that respects the historical particularity of Joseph's sale while drawing meaningful connections to contemporary concerns regarding human trafficking, exploitation and human dignity. The framework ultimately seeks to foster justice-oriented interpretations that challenge systems of oppression and affirm the value of vulnerable human lives.

Research methodology

This study employs HA as its primary methodological approach for examining the sale of Joseph in Genesis 37 and its relevance to contemporary discussions on human trafficking and human exploitation. HA facilitates a critical dialogue between the ancient text and present-day realities by recognising both the historical distinctiveness of the biblical narrative and its continuing ethical significance. Rather than imposing modern categories directly onto the text, the methodology seeks to identify points of convergence and divergence between the ancient experience of human commodification and contemporary forms of exploitation. In this way, HA provides the interpretive bridge through which the Joseph narrative is brought into conversation with current human rights concerns.

To support this hermeneutical process, the study employs historical-critical analysis. This method investigates the socio-historical context in which Genesis 37 emerged, paying particular attention to the social, economic and cultural realities of the ancient Near East. Hence, Smith (2004) stresses that biblical texts actively constructed categories of difference – often portraying foreign groups such as the Canaanites, Egyptians and

Philistines as inferior, corrupt or dangerous. The sale of persons, systems of servitude and commercial trading networks formed part of the broader environment within which the Joseph narrative was transmitted and understood. Historical-critical scholarship has demonstrated that ancient Israel developed within a region profoundly influenced by neighbouring societies such as Egypt and Mesopotamia, whose legal, economic and social institutions shaped local practices and worldviews (Finkelstein & Silberman, 2001:34–56). By situating Joseph's sale within this historical context, the study seeks to understand the narrative on its own terms before considering its contemporary significance.

The study further employs literary analysis through a close reading of Genesis 37. Literary analysis focuses on the structure, characterisation, plot development and thematic emphases of the narrative. Particular attention is given to the dynamics of power, jealousy, vulnerability, commodification and familial betrayal that culminate in Joseph's sale to passing traders (vv. 25–28). As Alter (1981:3–22) observes, biblical narratives employ sophisticated literary techniques that shape readers' perceptions of characters and events. A close literary reading therefore enables a deeper appreciation of how the narrative constructs Joseph's vulnerability and the actions of those who profit from his commodification. This approach also illuminates the ethical tensions embedded within the text and the ways in which the narrative invites reflection on human dignity and injustice.

The final stage of the methodology involves contemporary appropriation. Building on the historical-critical and literary findings, the study examines how the Joseph narrative may contribute to present-day conversations concerning human trafficking and related forms of exploitation (Blenkinsopp, 1992; Carroll, 1997; Dever, 2005). This process does not suggest that Joseph was a victim of human trafficking in the modern legal sense. Rather, it explores how themes of human commodification, forced displacement, loss of agency and economic exploitation resonate with contemporary experiences of trafficking and modern slavery. As Snyder (2008:12–18) notes, sacred texts often preserve patterns of human behaviour that remain relevant across different historical periods. Through HA, these thematic resonances become opportunities for ethical reflection and social critique rather than simplistic historical equivalences.

The integration of HA, historical-critical analysis and literary analysis provides a coherent methodological framework for this study. Historical-critical analysis establishes the ancient context of the narrative; literary analysis examines its textual and thematic dimensions, and HA facilitates its ethical appropriation within contemporary discussions on human trafficking and human dignity. Together, these approaches enable a historically responsible and socially relevant interpretation of Genesis 37.

A critical exegesis of Genesis 37 in its context

Genesis 37 serves as the opening narrative of the Joseph cycle (Gen. 37–50) and establishes the key theological, social and literary tensions that shape the entire Joseph story. Scholars (e.g. Sternberg, 1985; Alter, 2004) widely recognise it as a carefully crafted transitional narrative that links the patriarchal traditions to the emerging story of Israel in Egypt. Set within the fractured kinship world of Jacob's household, the chapter explores themes of preferential love, sibling rivalry, violence and the commodification of a human being.

The narrative begins with a brief introduction situating Joseph within Jacob's family (Gen. 37:1–2). Joseph is identified as a young shepherd, but the text immediately signals his exceptional status through Jacob's preferential love. The gift of the "ornate robe" (v. 3) symbolises both favour and division. Alter (2004:208) notes that such narrative details function symbolically, marking Joseph as both beloved and socially isolated. This preferential treatment disrupts the equilibrium of the family system and generates hostility among the brothers, a recurring motif in Genesis narratives of election and rejection (Wenham, 1994).

Joseph's dreams (vv. 5–11) intensify the conflict. From a literary perspective, dreams in Genesis function as divine communication and narrative foreshadowing (Sternberg, 1985:301–306). However, within the family context, Joseph's dreams are perceived as arrogance and dominance claims. Waltke (2001:507) argues that these dreams symbolically invert expected social hierarchies, provoking resentment because they suggest the reversal of fraternal authority. The dreams thus function both theologically

and socially: they anticipate Joseph's future elevation while destabilising his present relationships.

The narrative tension escalates when Jacob sends Joseph to check on his brothers (vv. 12–17). The geographical movement from Hebron to Shechem and Dothan increases Joseph's vulnerability by removing him from paternal protection. Hamilton (1995:416) observes that the phrase "Joseph wandered in the fields" symbolically foreshadows his loss of control and impending displacement. The intervention of a nameless man who directs Joseph to his brothers introduces narrative irony, as this guidance leads him toward his own endangerment.

The central crisis occurs in verses 18–28, where the brothers conspire to kill Joseph but ultimately sell him into slavery. Initially, the intent is fratricide (vv. 18–20), but Reuben's intervention temporarily redirects the plot. Judah's proposal marks a decisive shift from violence to economic exploitation: "What profit is it if we kill our brother?" (v. 26). Brueggemann (1982:302) notes that this rhetorical question reveals a commodifying logic in which human life is evaluated in terms of economic gain. Joseph is sold for twenty pieces of silver (v. 28), a transaction that reflects the reduction of a human being to market value.

From a historical-critical perspective, the presence of Midianite/Ishmaelite traders reflects known ancient Near Eastern trade networks linking Canaan and Egypt (Finkelstein & Silberman, 2001). These routes facilitated the movement of commodities, including human beings, within broader regional economies. Collins (2005:74) notes that slavery in the ancient Near East often emerged through trade, war and household debt structures rather than formal institutional systems as understood today. Joseph's sale therefore reflects a plausible socio-economic practice within this context.

Literarily, Genesis 37 is structured with irony. The brothers seek to nullify Joseph's dreams, yet their actions initiate the very process that will lead to their fulfilment in Egypt (Alter, 2004). This reversal is a key theological motif in Genesis: human schemes, even when destructive, are ultimately subsumed within divine providence (Sternberg, 1985). The narrative does not justify the brothers' actions but embeds them within a larger theological trajectory that unfolds gradually.

Postcolonial readings further illuminate the dynamics of exclusion within the narrative. Said's (1978) concept of "Othering" is useful for understanding how Joseph is gradually repositioned from insider to outsider. Before being physically sold, he is socially excluded through familial resentment and symbolic differentiation (his robe, dreams and status). Spivak's (1988) concern with silenced subaltern voices is also relevant, as Joseph has no agency in the decision that determines his fate. His body becomes the site of economic exchange between male actors who control his destiny.

Bhabha's (1994) notion of displacement and identity negotiation helps illuminate Joseph's transition from Canaan to Egypt as a moment of cultural rupture. Although Genesis 37 does not yet develop Joseph's adaptation, it initiates a process of forced mobility that will later define his identity as a foreigner within Egypt. This displacement underscores the vulnerability of individuals removed from their social and familial protections.

Theologically, Genesis 37 resists simple moral resolution. It presents a world in which human freedom can produce profound injustice, yet without disrupting the broader divine narrative arc. Fretheim (1984:350) observes that God's activity in Genesis often operates indirectly through human actions rather than overriding them. Genesis 37 thus holds together human culpability and theological complexity without resolving the tension prematurely.

In conclusion, the chapter is a tightly constructed narrative that combines family conflict, economic exchange and theological foreshadowing. A critical exegesis demonstrates that Joseph's sale is not merely an act of sibling rivalry but a profound instance of human commodification within an ancient socio-economic system. Through literary, historical and postcolonial analysis, the text reveals enduring questions about power, vulnerability and the value of human life – questions that continue to resonate in contemporary ethical discourse.

The sale of Joseph in Genesis 37: A narrative of human commodification

The central biblical text examined in this study is Genesis 37, which recounts the sale of Joseph by his brothers to traders travelling to Egypt.

Rather than treating the entire Hebrew Bible as a repository of trafficking narratives, this article focuses on a single episode that vividly illustrates the commodification of a human being within the socio-economic realities of the ancient Near East. The Joseph narrative provides a particularly useful case study because it portrays the intersection of family conflict, economic gain, vulnerability and forced displacement – elements that continue to feature prominently in contemporary discussions of human exploitation. Genesis 37 presents Joseph as the favoured son of Jacob, whose privileged status provokes intense resentment among his brothers (vv. 3–11). The narrative carefully develops the hostility directed towards Joseph, culminating in a conspiracy to eliminate him. Initially, the brothers contemplate murder (vv. 18–20), but Reuben intervenes and persuades them to throw Joseph into a pit instead (vv. 21–24). The turning point occurs when a caravan of traders appears on the route to Egypt. Judah proposes an alternative to murder: “Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites” (v. 27). Joseph is subsequently sold for twenty pieces of silver and taken to Egypt (v. 28). From a historical perspective, the narrative reflects commercial networks that linked Canaan and Egypt during the second millennium BCE. Trading caravans transported various commodities across the region, and persons could become part of these economic exchanges. While the narrative does not describe a formal institution of trafficking in the contemporary legal sense, it portrays the transfer of a human being through a commercial transaction. Joseph is treated not as a member of a family possessing inherent dignity but as an object of economic value. His brothers transform kinship into commerce, reducing a brother to a commodity that can be exchanged for profit. Several scholars have noted that slavery and the sale of persons formed part of the wider socio-economic structures of the ancient Near East (Osiek, 1992:35–39; Collins, 2005:73–79; Coogan, 2017:156–161). Within this context, Joseph’s sale reflects a world in which vulnerable individuals could be alienated from their families and incorporated into systems of servitude. The narrative therefore provides important evidence for understanding how human beings could become objects of economic exchange in antiquity. Nevertheless, it is important to recognise that the biblical text does not employ the modern concept of human trafficking. The social, legal and economic frameworks governing the contemporary trafficking of persons differ substantially from those of the ancient world. The vulnerability of Joseph is a significant feature of the

narrative. He is isolated from his father, surrounded by hostile brothers and deprived of any meaningful capacity to resist their actions. His experience reflects what Eliasaputra et al. (2021:78–80) describe as the loss of agency that frequently characterises situations of human exploitation. Joseph's fate is determined by more powerful actors who exercise control over his body, movement and future. The narrative thus exposes the profound imbalance of power that underlies acts of human commodification. A postcolonial reading further illuminates the power dynamics operating within the text. Said's (1978:54–58) concept of Othering helps explain how Joseph's brothers symbolically exclude him from the familial community before selling him. Although Joseph remains biologically related to his brothers, he is treated as an outsider whose suffering no longer warrants moral concern. The process of exclusion enables his commodification. Through this lens, the narrative reveals how systems of exploitation often depend upon first stripping victims of their social identity and human value. Spivak's (1988:271–313) concern for the silenced voices of the subaltern also proves relevant. Joseph exercises little agency throughout the transaction that determines his future. Decisions concerning his life are made entirely by others. The narrative therefore highlights the experience of individuals whose voices are suppressed by structures of power. Although Genesis 37 ultimately develops into a story of survival and elevation, the initial episode remains a stark portrayal of human vulnerability and powerlessness. The Joseph narrative also raises important theological questions concerning human dignity. The text implicitly condemns the brothers' actions by portraying the devastating consequences of their betrayal for both Joseph and Jacob. The narrative does not celebrate commodification; rather, it exposes the moral failures that make such actions possible. Brueggemann (2003:299–302) observes that the Joseph story repeatedly demonstrates how human schemes of domination are ultimately challenged by divine purposes that preserve life and restore broken relationships. Within the broader theological framework of Genesis, Joseph's sale is therefore presented not as a normative practice but as an act of injustice that God ultimately transforms for redemptive purposes. Viewed through the lens of HA, Genesis 37 provides a valuable resource for contemporary reflection on exploitation and human dignity (Harper, 2016; Sugirtharajah, 2005). The goal of appropriation is not to identify Joseph as a victim of modern human trafficking but to explore how his experience of commodification,

forced displacement and vulnerability speaks to contemporary contexts in which human beings continue to be treated as objects for economic gain. By maintaining the distinction between the ancient narrative and modern trafficking while recognising important thematic parallels, the interpreter can engage responsibly with both worlds. In this sense, Genesis 37 becomes an important theological and ethical text for contemporary discussions concerning exploitation, justice and the protection of vulnerable persons.

Reading Joseph's sale within the Imperial World of the Ancient Near East

Although Genesis 37 predates the Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian periods that later shaped Israel's historical experience, the Joseph narrative reflects a broader ancient Near Eastern world characterised by unequal power relations, commercial exchange and the movement of people across political and geographical boundaries. Understanding Joseph's sale within this wider context provides important insights into the socio-economic realities that made the commodification of persons possible. Rather than examining imperialism and colonialism across the entirety of Israel's history, this study focuses on how postcolonial perspectives illuminate the power dynamics embedded within the Joseph narrative.

The sale of Joseph occurs within an environment shaped by regional trade networks linking Canaan and Egypt. The caravan of Ishmaelite and Midianite traders travelling to Egypt (Gen. 37:25–28) represents more than a narrative detail; it reflects economic systems through which goods, wealth and, at times, human beings circulated throughout the ancient Near East. Joseph's transfer from Canaan to Egypt therefore places him within larger structures of economic exchange that transcended family and tribal boundaries. As a young and vulnerable individual, Joseph becomes subject to forces beyond his control, illustrating how human lives could be absorbed into broader systems of commerce and power.

A postcolonial reading informed by Said (1978:54–68) draws attention to the processes through which vulnerable persons are transformed into "others." Before Joseph is sold, his brothers symbolically exclude him from the family community. His favoured status, distinctive garment and

dreams become grounds for hostility and alienation (vv. 3–11). The act of selling Joseph is therefore preceded by a process of social exclusion that renders him expendable in the eyes of his brothers. Such exclusion reflects a broader pattern identified by postcolonial scholars, whereby domination frequently depends upon first denying the full humanity and social belonging of those subjected to exploitation.

The Joseph narrative also reveals the intersection of power and economic interest. Judah's proposal to sell Joseph rather than kill him (vv. 26–27) transforms familial conflict into economic opportunity. The decision is not motivated by compassion but by profit. Joseph's value becomes monetary rather than relational. Through this act, the narrative exposes how economic incentives can override ethical obligations and human solidarity. This dynamic remains significant for contemporary readers because many modern forms of human exploitation similarly emerge where financial gain is prioritised above human dignity.

Spivak's (1988:271–313) concern for subaltern voices further illuminates the narrative. Throughout the transaction, Joseph exercises little agency over his circumstances. Decisions concerning his future are made by more powerful actors, while his own voice remains largely absent. His experience reflects the vulnerability of individuals whose lives are controlled by others and whose capacity for self-determination is severely constrained. Although Genesis later recounts Joseph's rise to prominence in Egypt, Genesis 37 foregrounds his powerlessness and displacement.

Bhabha's (1994:112–122) concept of hybridity also offers useful insights. Joseph's movement from Canaan into Egypt initiates a process of cultural transition that ultimately reshapes his identity. While Genesis 37 focuses primarily on the sale itself, the broader Joseph narrative portrays a figure who must negotiate multiple cultural worlds. His experience illustrates how individuals subjected to displacement often inhabit complex spaces between cultures, identities and systems of power. Such observations are particularly relevant within postcolonial interpretation because they highlight both vulnerability and resilience in contexts of domination.

From the perspective of HA, these postcolonial insights help contemporary readers engage Genesis 37 in ethically meaningful ways. The narrative is not merely a record of an ancient family dispute; it is a story that exposes the

mechanisms through which exclusion, commodification and powerlessness become possible. By critically appropriating the Joseph narrative, readers are invited to recognise similar dynamics within contemporary societies, where vulnerable persons continue to be subjected to exploitation, displacement and economic commodification. Such appropriation does not collapse the distinction between the ancient and modern worlds but allows the text to contribute meaningfully to ongoing conversations concerning justice, dignity and human worth.

Consequently, the significance of Genesis 37 lies not only in its historical setting but also in its capacity to illuminate enduring patterns of human behaviour. The narrative demonstrates how economic interests, social exclusion and unequal power relations can converge to produce acts of exploitation. Through a postcolonial reading informed by HA, Joseph's sale becomes a powerful lens through which both ancient and contemporary forms of human commodification may be critically examined.

Vulnerability, power and social location in Genesis 37

Although Joseph is neither a foreign woman nor a member of a socially marginal ethnic group, Genesis 37 nevertheless presents a compelling case study of how vulnerability is produced through unequal power relations. A postcolonial and appropriation-oriented reading of the narrative reveals that exploitation often emerges where individuals are stripped of agency and rendered subject to the interests of more powerful actors. The Joseph story demonstrates that vulnerability is not determined solely by ethnicity, gender or class; it may also arise through family dynamics, social exclusion and economic opportunism.

From the outset of Genesis 37, Joseph occupies an ambiguous social position within Jacob's household. On the one hand, he enjoys privilege as the favoured son of his father (v. 3). On the other hand, this privileged status generates hostility from his brothers and ultimately contributes to his isolation. His distinctive garment and dreams become symbols of difference that separate him from the familial collective. Through a postcolonial lens, Joseph becomes an "other" within his own household. Before he is physically sold, he is socially excluded. Said's (1978:54–58) concept of

Othering is useful here because it demonstrates how exploitation often begins with processes of exclusion that deny individuals full belonging within a community.

Class considerations also emerge within the narrative. Joseph's brothers transform a family relationship into an economic transaction when they accept twenty pieces of silver in exchange for his life (v. 28). The exchange reveals how economic interests can supersede kinship obligations and moral responsibility. Joseph is no longer treated as a brother but as an object possessing commercial value. His commodification reflects a broader reality of the ancient Near East in which human beings could become objects of exchange within economic systems. Through the lens of HA, this aspect of the narrative invites reflection on contemporary contexts in which economic gain continues to motivate the exploitation of vulnerable persons.

The issue of agency is particularly significant. Throughout the transaction, Joseph possesses little power to determine his own fate. Decisions concerning his future are made by his brothers and by the traders who purchase him. Spivak's (1988:271–313) concern for silenced and marginalised voices is therefore highly relevant. Joseph's experience illustrates how vulnerable individuals can be deprived of meaningful participation in decisions that profoundly affect their lives. The narrative foregrounds the imbalance of power between those who control economic and social resources and those who are subjected to their decisions.

Although gender is not the central focus of Genesis 37, an intersectional perspective remains valuable because it highlights the broader structures of domination that make exploitation possible. Patriarchal authority shapes the world in which Joseph lives. Decisions concerning inheritance, family relationships and social status are largely determined by male actors. The same patriarchal system that privileges Joseph as Jacob's favourite son also creates the conditions that enable his brothers to exercise power over him. Thus, the narrative demonstrates that systems of domination can affect individuals in different ways, even when they occupy privileged positions within certain social hierarchies.

Joseph's displacement to Egypt further intensifies his vulnerability. Once removed from his family and homeland, he becomes a foreigner

in an unfamiliar environment. Thus, Paul (1987) affirms that foreigners, especially war captives, were common victims of forced labour. Smith-Christopher (2002) argues that displacement fundamentally alters personal and communal identity by removing individuals from familiar social, cultural and familial networks. Joseph's forced removal from Canaan to Egypt initiates a similar experience of social dislocation. Separated from his family and homeland, Joseph is compelled to navigate unfamiliar structures of power and belonging. Although the narrative later depicts his rise within Egyptian society, Genesis 37 foregrounds the vulnerability associated with involuntary displacement. While the circumstances differ significantly from modern forms of trafficking, the narrative nevertheless highlights the human consequences of forced displacement and loss of social protection.

Viewed through HA, Genesis 37 reveals how vulnerability is often produced through the convergence of multiple forms of power. Joseph's suffering is not the result of a single factor but of overlapping dynamics that include jealousy, exclusion, economic self-interest and social powerlessness. The narrative therefore provides a useful framework for understanding how exploitation occurs when individuals are deprived of agency and reduced to objects of exchange. Such themes remain relevant in contemporary discussions concerning human trafficking and related forms of exploitation, where vulnerability frequently emerges from the interaction of social, economic and relational inequalities.

The Joseph narrative ultimately challenges readers to recognise the human cost of commodification. By exposing the processes through which a brother becomes a commodity, Genesis 37 invites ethical reflection on the value of human life and the dangers of systems that prioritise profit, power and self-interest over human dignity. Through a HA, the narrative becomes a resource for confronting contemporary forms of exploitation while maintaining sensitivity to its ancient historical context.

Appropriating the sale of Joseph for contemporary discourses on human trafficking

HA seeks to establish a critical dialogue between the ancient world of the biblical text and the realities of contemporary readers. The objective is neither to reproduce the past uncritically nor to impose modern categories onto ancient narratives. Rather, appropriation involves discerning how the ethical, social and theological concerns embedded within a text may illuminate contemporary challenges while preserving the historical integrity of the original context (Rugwiji, 2020). Within this framework, Genesis 37 offers significant resources for engaging contemporary discussions on human trafficking and related forms of exploitation. The sale of Joseph should not be understood as an instance of human trafficking in the modern legal sense. Contemporary trafficking involves complex international networks, coercive recruitment practices and forms of exploitation shaped by modern economic and political realities (Gallagher, 2010:29–31). Genesis 37 emerged within a vastly different socio-historical environment. Nevertheless, the narrative contains themes that resonate strongly with present-day experiences of exploitation. Joseph is deprived of agency, removed from the protection of his family, commodified for economic gain and transported into an unfamiliar environment where his future is determined by others. These themes provide important points of engagement for contemporary reflection. One of the most significant contributions of the Joseph narrative is its exposure of the process of commodification. Joseph's brothers cease to regard him as a brother possessing inherent dignity and instead assign him a monetary value. The acceptance of twenty pieces of silver transforms a human relationship into an economic transaction. Through HA, this act invites contemporary readers to reflect on the ways in which modern trafficking similarly reduces human beings to commodities whose worth is measured primarily in economic terms. Whether through forced labour, sexual exploitation or other forms of coercive servitude, victims of trafficking are frequently treated as objects of profit rather than persons possessing intrinsic value. The narrative also highlights the role of vulnerability in facilitating exploitation (Clawson & Dutch, 2008; Zimmerman, 2013). Joseph's isolation from his father, his dependence upon his brothers and his inability to resist their decisions render him particularly susceptible to abuse. Contemporary anti-trafficking

research similarly identifies vulnerability as a major factor contributing to exploitation. Poverty, displacement, family breakdown, political instability and social exclusion often create conditions in which individuals become susceptible to trafficking networks (Bales, 1999:12–18; Gallagher, 2010:31–35). While the specific circumstances differ, both the ancient narrative and contemporary realities demonstrate how exploitation frequently targets those who possess limited social power. A further point of appropriation concerns the relationship between profit and human suffering. Judah's proposal to sell Joseph is motivated by economic benefit (vv. 26–27). The narrative therefore reveals how financial interests can override ethical responsibilities and human solidarity. Contemporary trafficking likewise thrives because it generates substantial profits for traffickers, employers and criminal organisations. Through HA, Genesis 37 challenges readers to examine economic systems and social practices that permit human beings to be exploited for material gain. The narrative encourages ethical scrutiny of structures that privilege profit above human dignity. The Joseph story also contributes to contemporary discussions concerning resilience and restoration. Although Genesis 37 portrays Joseph's victimisation, the broader narrative demonstrates that exploitation does not ultimately define his identity. Joseph survives displacement, servitude and imprisonment before attaining a position of influence in Egypt. Appropriation must be careful not to romanticise suffering or suggest that all victims experience similar outcomes. Nevertheless, the narrative affirms the possibility of survival, restoration and renewed agency following experiences of profound injustice. Such themes may offer valuable theological resources for conversations concerning survivor rehabilitation and social reintegration. From a postcolonial perspective, the Joseph narrative exposes how systems of power operate through exclusion, commodification and control. Said's concept of Othering, Spivak's concern for silenced voices and Bhabha's insights regarding displacement and identity help illuminate the mechanisms through which vulnerable individuals become subject to exploitation. Appropriated within contemporary contexts, these insights encourage readers to identify and challenge structures that perpetuate inequality, marginalisation and human suffering. Ultimately, the contribution of Genesis 37 to contemporary anti-trafficking discourse lies not in providing direct legal solutions but in offering an ethical vision centred on human dignity. The narrative demonstrates the destructive

consequences of treating human beings as commodities and exposes the social, economic and relational forces that make such treatment possible. Through HA, Joseph's sale becomes more than an ancient story of familial betrayal; it becomes a lens through which contemporary readers may critically examine modern forms of exploitation and renew commitments to justice, protection and human worth. In this way, Genesis 37 continues to speak meaningfully to contemporary societies. By maintaining the distinction between the ancient world and modern trafficking while recognising important thematic continuities, HA enables a responsible and ethically engaged interpretation of the text. The Joseph narrative thus emerges as a valuable theological resource for confronting contemporary forms of human exploitation and affirming the dignity of vulnerable persons

Conclusion

This study has examined the sale of Joseph in Genesis 37 through the lens of HA, supported by selected insights from postcolonial theory. By focusing on a single narrative rather than a broad survey of the Hebrew Bible, the article has demonstrated how Genesis 37 portrays the commodification of a human being within a socio-economic and familial context marked by power imbalance, exclusion and economic self-interest. The analysis has shown that Joseph's experience is shaped by processes of social othering, familial betrayal and economic exchange, culminating in his sale for twenty pieces of silver. While the narrative cannot be equated directly with contemporary legal definitions of human trafficking, it nonetheless presents a powerful depiction of human commodification, displacement and loss of agency. These dynamics provide a conceptual bridge for ethical reflection on modern forms of exploitation. Through HA, the study has argued that Genesis 37 can be responsibly read as a text that speaks into contemporary contexts where human beings continue to be treated as objects of economic value. The narrative exposes how easily human dignity can be subordinated to profit, jealousy and structural inequality. At the same time, it challenges readers to resist interpretive practices that normalise or naturalise exploitation, whether in ancient or modern settings. Postcolonial insights drawn from Said, Spivak and Bhabha have further

illuminated how exclusion, silencing and displacement operate within the narrative. Joseph's lack of agency, his removal from his community and his forced relocation to Egypt underscore the vulnerability of individuals subjected to the decisions of more powerful actors. These dynamics resonate with contemporary discussions on exploitation, not as direct equivalence, but as ethical analogy. Ultimately, the study contributes to scholarship by demonstrating that Genesis 37, when read through HA, functions as a resource for ethical reflection on human dignity, justice and exploitation. It shows that the Joseph narrative continues to generate meaningful theological and social insight, particularly when interpreted with attention to historical difference and ethical responsibility. Rather than collapsing ancient and modern contexts, the study maintains their distinction while allowing the text to speak into contemporary concerns regarding human exploitation and the value of human life.

References

- Alter, R. (1981). *The Art of Biblical Narrative*. Basic Books.
- Alter, R. (2004). *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (Rev. ed.). Basic Books.
- Bales, K. (1999). *Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy*. California: University of California Press. ISBN: 978–0520272910
- Bhabha, H.K. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. Routledge.
- Blenkinsopp, J. (1992). *The Pentateuch: A Social–Scientific Introduction*. New York: Doubleday.
- Brueggemann, W. (1982). *Genesis: Interpretation commentary*. John Knox Press.
- Brueggemann, W. (2003). *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*. Fortress Press.
- Carroll, M. D. R. (1997). *Slavery in the Old Testament*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Clawson, H.J. & Dutch, N. (2008). Faith-Based Efforts to Combat Human Trafficking. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation.

- Collins, J.J. (2005). *The Bible after Babel: Historical Criticism in a Postmodern Age*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.
- Coogan, M.D. (2017). *The Old Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures (4th ed.)*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Dever, W.G. (2005). *Did God Have a Wife? Archaeology and Folk Religion in Ancient Israel*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.
- Eliasaputra, M.P., Rundupadang, L., Tuwoliu, N.H, Simanungkalit, M.R.S., & Salim, S. (2021). Narrative Critical Analysis of Genesis 37:12–36 as a Theological Reflection towards Human Trafficking. *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research*, 669:77–82.
- Finkelstein, I., & Silberman, N.A. (2001). *The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of Its Sacred Texts*. Free Press.
- Fretheim, T.E. (1984). *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
- Gallagher, A. (2010). *The International Law of Human Trafficking*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hamilton, V.P. (1995). *The book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*. Eerdmans.
- Harper, L.A. (2016). *The Very Good Gospel: How Everything Wrong Can Be Made Right*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.
- King, P.J. & Stager, L.E. (2001). *Life in Biblical Israel*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Martin, J.W. (2010). Slavery in Ancient Israel and Its Economic Implications. *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Studies*, 34(2), 85–105.
- Osiek, C. (1992). *Slavery in the Ancient World and Early Christian Christianity*. Fortress Press.

- Paul, S. M. (1987). *Studies in the Book of the Covenant in the Light of Cuneiform and Biblical Law*. Leiden: Brill.
- Rugwiji, T. (2020). The quest for hermeneutics of appropriation as a thematic approach for critical biblical interpretation. *HTS Theological Studies* 76(1):a5392. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i1.5392>.
- Said, E.W. (1978). *Orientalism*. Pantheon Books.
- Smith, M.S. (2004). *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.
- Smith-Christopher, D.L. (2002). *A biblical theology of exile*. Fortress Press.
- Snyder, T. (2008). *The Human Trafficking Handbook: A Practical Guide to the Identification, Prevention and Prosecution of Human Trafficking*. University of Toronto Press.
- Spivak, G.C. (1988). Can the Subaltern Speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (pp. 271–313). University of Illinois Press.
- Sternberg, M. (1985). *The poetics of biblical narrative*. Indiana University Press.
- Sugirtharajah, R.S. (2005). *The Bible and Empire: Postcolonial Explorations*. Cambridge: Cambridge: University Press.
- Waltke, B.K. (2001). *Genesis: A commentary*. Zondervan.
- Wenham, G.J. (1994). *Genesis 16–50*. Word Books.
- Yee, G.A. (2003). *Poor Banished Children of Eve: Woman as Evil in the Hebrew Bible*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.
- Zimmerman, Y.C. (2013). *Other Dreams of Freedom: Religion, Sex and Human Trafficking*. Oxford: University Press.