

NOTES

How was Joseph taken to Egypt? (Genesis 37.12-36)

Many translators have problems with the story in Genesis 37 which tells how Joseph's brothers got rid of him and how he finished up in Egypt. The main problem in the text as we have it is the appearance of two apparently different and separate groups of travelling traders, one group referred to as "Ishmaelites" (verses 25, 27, 28; also 39.1) and the other as "Midianites" (verses 28 and 36). And the problem of which group actually took Joseph to Egypt and sold him there remains as a problem for readers of most English translations.

A majority of commentators are convinced by their study of the text of Genesis that the present text has been formed by fusing together material from a number of different sources. For the most part the fusing together of the earlier sources is not obvious; but we also notice some places where traces of the sources remain. And chapter 37 is one of those places.

Speiser refers to this passage as "a parade example of the problems involved in documentary detection" (*The Anchor Bible, Genesis*, page 293). His procedure is to mark the boundaries of the different sources in his translation with a slash (/), but otherwise to translate the text in its present sequence. Following his analysis there are in verses 18-30 two parallel versions of how Joseph was taken to Egypt:

- 1) They noticed him (Joseph) from a distance; and before he got close to them they conspired to kill him. They said to one another, "Here comes that dreamer! Why don't we kill him now and throw him into one of the pits? We could say that a wild beast devoured him. We shall then see what came of his dreams!" (37.18-20)

They sat down to their meal. Looking up, they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, their camels ... Then Judah said to his brothers, "What would we gain by killing our brother and covering up his blood? I say, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, but let us not do away with him ourselves. After all, he is our brother, our own flesh!" His brothers agreed. (37.25-27)

They sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. (37.28b)

[... When Joseph was taken to Egypt, a certain Egyptian ... bought him from the Ishmaelites who had brought him there. (39.1)]

- 2) ... When Reuben heard this, he tried to save him (Joseph) from their hands. He said, "Let us not take his life!" "Shed no blood!" Reuben told them. "Just throw him into that pit, out there in the desert, but don't do away with him yourselves" – his purpose being to deliver him from their hands and restore him to his father. So when Joseph reached his brothers, they stripped Joseph of his tunic, the ornamented tunic that he was wearing, and they seized him and

threw him into the pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it. (37.21-24)

Meanwhile, Midianite traders passed by, and they (the traders) pulled Joseph up from the pit. Joseph was thus taken to Egypt. (28a&c)

When Reuben went back to the pit and saw that Joseph was missing, he rent his clothes and returned to his brothers, exclaiming, "The boy is gone! What am I to do now?" (37.29-30)

[... The Midianites, meanwhile, sold Joseph in Egypt to Potiphar, a courtier of Pharaoh, his chief steward. (37.36)]

Driver and Moffatt also mark the boundaries of text from the different sources; but their conclusions are different in a number of respects from Speiser. So there is not complete agreement about which text belongs in which of the two parallel versions.

If we accept in general terms the proposition that the text as we have it has been composed using two versions of the one story line, there really is a problem if we just leave it as it stands.

Leaving aside the textual problem of who pulled Joseph out of the pit (verse 18), the main and most obvious discrepancy or difference in the text is in the name given to the group of traders who came along and took Joseph to Egypt. This variation is simply explained when we realise that there are two versions of the story, with each version using a different name. But in the text as we have it there appear to be two separate groups, and the details of what actually happened to Joseph are quite confused.

It is not that the appearance of two groups of traders is impossible as far as the selling of Joseph is concerned (although I feel that the simpler story line is more likely). But it is highly unlikely, if not impossible, that two different groups took Joseph to Egypt – it had to be only one group. The nature of this textual difficulty, then, is that there is an overlap of material from two sources which, if not read in this light, results in a story line that is either impossible or very unlikely, and that is supported by neither of the sources.

We may ask: Did the person or persons who put together the earlier material deliberately produce a composite text which made the story very different from either of their sources? Or were they not aware that this would be the result? I don't think this was the case. The composer and the first hearers or readers must either not have noticed a problem at all, or been able to recognise and understand what was done as an acceptable literary procedure.

It must be a matter of conjecture about what information or perspective the Israelites had that we don't have which enabled them to understand this text without the difficulty we feel in it. My guess is that "Ishmaelite" and "Midianite" were both understood as general terms for nomadic people thought to be descended from Abraham, and the two terms were therefore recognised as referring to the same group. Actually

this has a lot more substance to it than a pure guess. In Judges 8.22-24 the Israelites invited Gideon to rule over them, because "you have saved us from the Midianites" (GNB). Gideon went on to ask the Israelites to give him the gold jewellery which they had taken as spoil from the Midianites, and the text includes a parenthetical statement: "For they had golden earrings because they were Ishmaelites." Two typical entries from Bible dictionaries which suggest a wider general sense for each of the names are:

"Midianites, descendants of Midian, a son of Abraham and his concubine Keturah ... The term "Midianite" probably identified a confederation of tribes that roamed far beyond (their) ancestral homeland, a usage that explains the biblical references to Midianites in Sinai, Canaan, the Jordan Valley, Moab, and Transjordan's eastern desert" (Harper's Bible Dictionary, page 634).

"Ishmaelite, a descendant of Ishmael. The term is probably sometimes used as a general name for all the Abrahamic peoples from Egypt to the Euphrates, and perhaps to the Persian Gulf, their headquarters being in western Arabia" (Unger's Bible Dictionary, page 540).

If an explanation such as this is true, then Israelites who heard or read Genesis knew very well that there was only one group of traders involved; and in that case what verse 28 says is:

"When those traders came along, the brothers pulled Joseph up out of the pit and sold him to them for twenty pieces of silver. And the traders took Joseph to Egypt."

Understanding the composite text in this way makes the story line much closer to the story line of each of the individual sources; and each source contributes certain elements to the overall narrative.

Whether we believe this particular explanation or not, our understanding of the text as being composed out of two sources, which each make reference to only one group of traders, allows – or requires – us to accept that the composer intended the text to be understood this way. For translation of the whole passage in this light, as a single coherent but composite narrative, certain advice to translators follows:

1) It should be made quite clear that there was **only one group of travelling traders** in the story. One way of doing this is to use a general description such as "traders" in place of both names, "Ishmaelites" and "Midianites"; and a footnote can be used to explain this if appropriate. Another way is to use just one name throughout the story, either "Midianites" or "Ishmaelites", again with a footnote of explanation if appropriate. A middle way would be to use one of the names plus a general term, with a footnote if appropriate. A less satisfactory way would be to keep both names in the text, but rely on a footnote to explain that the different names really refer to the same group of people.

It is important to note here that no English version deals with the

problem of the two different names in this passage. GNB does deal with the identical problem in Judges 8.22-24 by substituting "Midianites" for "Ishmaelites" in verse 24 (without even a footnote!); but surprisingly it does not make that adjustment here. Where modern-day readers use English as well as their own language, an explanatory footnote will therefore be desirable or necessary if the two names do not both appear in the translation in their language.

2) If the translation refers to only one group of traders, then the critical pronoun "they" in "they drew Joseph up and lifted him out of the pit, and sold him ..." (RSV, verse 28) must be taken to refer to the brothers, since to make it refer to the traders would result in the nonsense that they sold Joseph to themselves, unless other changes are made in the text itself. (This is the way GNB and NIV translate, even though they retain the two different names for the traders in verse 28.)

EUAN FRY

HOW WAS THAT?

Question:

"What does the story of the labourers in the vineyard teach us? Why do those who came at the eleventh hour receive as much as those who came at the first hour?"

Answer:

"It teaches us that we shouldn't be too eager to start work."

* * * * *

Quotation from a local newspaper somewhere:

"We apologise for a misprint in last week's edition, in which we stated that ... is a Defective in the local police force. We should of course have said that he is a Detective in the local police farce."

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Seen on a church notice board:

Tonight's sermon: WHAT IS HELL?

Come early and listen to our choir practising.

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"He who translates literally creates fiction; he who adds, blasphemes"

(Tosefta Megillah 4.31,
quoted by Jacob Milgrom in *Bible Review*, August 1994)