

# Narrative Critical Analysis of Genesis 37:12-36 as a Theological Reflection Towards Human Trafficking

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**Abstract**— The survey shows the existence of human trafficking practices that are unwittingly happening to this day. This article intends to contribute theological thinking to the practice of human trafficking that is still happening today. This theological thinking is built through a critical analysis of the narrative of Genesis 37:12-36 using narrative analysis. This analysis aims to critically review the text on the issue of human trafficking. The result of this research is Joseph's experience of being traded forcibly without his consent serves as a reminder to the church of its role to embrace and help others. The church should no longer be passive to the environment, but actively support the government or the law in dealing with the problem of human trafficking. Thus, if the church provides counseling or education as well as legal assistance to Indonesian workers who are prone to be trafficked illegally to protect themselves, the church has carried out its true task of embracing and protecting fellow human beings. This theological reflection contributed. **Research Contribution:** This research provides a theological reflection on the issue of human trafficking in the IoT era.

**Keywords**—trafficking; humans; joseph; old testament; theology

## I. INTRODUCTION

Human trafficking unwittingly still exists today and tends to get less attention from many people. Human trafficking that is occurring in the world is an inhumane act and certainly violates the prevailing morality in society. The United Nations defines trafficking as the recruitment, transportation, transfer,

harboring, or receipt of persons, through the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of deception, of the abuse of power, or of a position of vulnerability to give or receive payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person who has control over another person, for exploitation [1]. Exploitation itself includes sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, or the harvesting of human organs.

Indonesia is one of the target countries and at a certain level becomes a destination country for men, women, and their children to take to become forced laborers and victims to be trafficked [2], [3]. There is a case in West Kalimantan, where a mother named Arsinah witnessed that children aged 10-12 years were being employed in Malaysia with their passports stating that they were 20 years old. These children were employed without pay, raped, and made into sex slaves [4]. Most trafficking victims are trapped because they do not have legal documents or have stayed past the permitted visit duration. One million of the 1.9 million Indonesian workers abroad are illegally exploited and even intentionally trapped in debt [5].

From this situation, the potential for human trafficking practices to occur is increasing. It is even necessary to know that technological advances in the IoT era also have an impact on increasing the number of human trafficking. IoT which stands for *Internet of Things* a conceptual design aiming to expand the advantages of the internet. It is undeniable that IoT

itself is real-time, which means that network systems in IoT can monitor and manage data remotely. In the IoT era, human trafficking is included in *cyber trafficking*. Recruitment for *cyber trafficking* occurs a lot on social media such as Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, and WhatsApp, including dating applications such as Tinder and Grindr [6].

One of the results of the progress in the IoT era that is widely used is social media, which in fact, still has a detrimental impact and risk to social life if misused. In some studies, social media has become a source of advanced threats to intelligence, and cybercriminals have been shifting the focus of their attacks to it. This technological advancement, namely social media, has also unintentionally made it easier for human traffickers to sell their victims. Social media is one of the results of technological progress which is often a tool that is misused to trade fellow human beings [7], [8].

Some previous research related to the events of 37:12-36 focuses on the law and the social situation at the time concerning Joseph's trade. The results of previous studies attributed the human trafficking that occurred to Joseph inseparable from the laws and norms that prevailed that day and its relationship with God's plan for Joseph's brilliant future. The focus highlighted in some pre-existing research that Joseph in events 37:12-26 is a series of supporting narratives up to Joseph's appointment as the leader who will save his people Israel [9], [10]. This paper intends to answer the main theme that lies in the theological response to human trafficking, to hold theological reflections for the text of Genesis 37:12-36 which features the scene of human trafficking. By visiting the text of Genesis 37:12-36, Christian theology shows its courage to revisit the text that has been unearthed from another point of view. The victims of human trafficking are those who are deprived of their right to life but are unable to defend or liberate themselves at all times, including in the text of Genesis 37:12-36. Therefore, this paper is not only academically patterned to answer the theological struggles of the church, but also advocated (assisting and championing) to increase the church's attention and focus its theological thinking on the issue of human trafficking. By analyzing the text of Genesis 37:12-36, the author will present an alternative perspective to the text using a narrative approach and give relevance to theological thinking of the practice of human trafficking.

## II. METHOD

Narrative Genesis 37:12-36 will be dissected using narrative analysis which includes analysis of characters, dialogues, scenes, storylines, and narrators to find the meaning contained in the text [11]. The narrative analysis of the Genesis 37:12-36 will focus on Joseph's experience as a trafficked figure, to explore the relevance of the text to the issue of online-based human trafficking in the IoT era. In the first step, the authors will review the background of the book of Genesis to determine the social context of the text. Next, the authors will conduct a narrative analysis of the text to explore the meaning of the narrative, which ultimately favors the victim. This narrative analysis will be carried out in a descriptive-

analytic manner by relying on a variety of primary literature such as the Bible and secondary literatures such as commentaries, Bible encyclopedias, and other scientific articles [12]. Not all parts of the passage will be dissected in-depth, only the important parts in the plot of this narrative that require special attention. Finally, in the conclusion section, the authors will relate the meaning of the text and its relevance to the issue of human trafficking in the IoT era, so that Joseph's experience can become a call for the church to seriously confront the practice of human trafficking.

## III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### A. *Socio-cultural Background The Book of Genesis*

Family is the main unit in the structure of OT society. From the beginning, God initiated His plan of redemption through one family, namely the family of Abraham. Through Abraham's family, God called His people to a special relationship with Him, and this was confirmed by a covenant. This is why the members included in this covenant are those who are referred to as "seeds"-of Abraham and hence the descendants of Isaac and Jacob (Lev. 26:42, 45) [13]. The concept of "offspring" was physically very important to the Israelites. For the descendants were the basis of the covenant. In the case of Joseph's slavery in Egypt, it is clear that he was enslaved through the process of slave trade

The human trafficking that used to lead to slavery in the Israelites was very different from slavery in major civilizations, such as the contemporaneous Ancient Near Eastern empires and specifically the later Greek and Roman empires. In those civilizations, the slave markets were full of prisoners of war and exiles. Slaves were inhumanly treated as working machines. However, in ancient Israel agricultural society, slavery was closer to indentured servitude, where they usually served the household by doing domestic labor and lived in the house.

Slave labor only complements but does not replace the labor of other household members [14]. In other words, slave labor in Israel could be free from physical labor, unlike in ancient Greek society. As long as they were treated humanely (as required by law), slavery was hardly any different from the various types of paid jobs. Because slaves had more rights and legal protections in Israel than in any other contemporaneous societies

In the case of Joseph's slavery in Egypt, it is clear that he was enslaved through the process of slave trade. Slaves could be purchased from their owners or slave traders (cf. Gen. 17:12,13,27; Eccl. 2:7) [14]. The law did allow the Hebrews to buy foreign slaves from foreigners, both in Israel and outside (Lev. 25:24). In ancient times, slaves were sold along with all kinds of merchandise from one land to another. Thus the Midianite and Ishmael merchants sold Joseph to a high-ranking Egyptian official (Gen. 37:36; 39:1). In the case of Joseph's slavery, it can also be categorized that he became a slave due to kidnapping. Kidnapping someone, and turning the victim into

slavery was an offense punishable by death under either the Hammurabi or the Mosaic Law (Ex. 21:16; Deut. 24:7). In this narrative, Joseph's brothers violated the existing law (Gen. 37:27-28 and 45:4) [15]. Besides, the price of the slaves sold was not the same, depending on the circumstances, sex, age, and health. However, in the course of history, the price of slaves has increased like any other commodity.

In the end, it can be concluded that in the social conditions at the time of Genesis, human trafficking, in this context leading to slavery, can indeed be said to be justifiable, since Israelites still treated slaves humanely, and this practice was permitted by the law. However, nowadays it can be seen that the issue of human trafficking is no longer humanizing. The victims lost all their rights, traded and oftentimes, their organs also become objects of illegal trade.

### *B. Narrative Analysis of Genesis 37:12-36*

The narrative of Genesis 37:12-36 is in the context of the detailed account of Joseph's life. The narrative prologue phase in the first verse indicates that the Genesis 37 narrative is set in a situation where the protagonist Joseph was treated specifically as a little boy among his brothers [16]. The beginning of this narrative hints that Genesis 37:12-36 is part of the continuation of the previous text. Therefore, the Genesis 37 narrative can be seen as a narrative that shares the same theme as the rest of Genesis, namely election and salvation. Just as the Israelites were chosen as God's people and saved from slavery, at the end of the narrative, Joseph's election as the savior of the Israelites was brought into by the incident of him being trafficked by the Midianites to the Egyptians. This predicament finally brought salvation to all of Israel.

After giving the setting of time and place for this narrative, the author introduces the characters who will play a role in this narrative. There is one main character in this narrative: Joseph he has been introduced and his background story written in full. It is said that at first Joseph's father Jacob loved him more than all his other sons, because he was born in his old age as the firstborn of his beloved Rachel. Jacob made Joseph a long-sleeved coat that reached the wrists and ankles, as worn by the nobles and sons of the kings at that time [16]. It is suspected that this is the forerunner of the hatred of Joseph's brothers which will eventually lead to conflict.

In context, the trigger for Joseph's trade began when Israel (Jacob) loved Joseph more than all his other sons. The hatred of his brothers grew when Joseph told them about two dreams that he had. His dreams clearly showed his supremacy; the first was over his brothers, the second was over all the children of Israel. In a short time, the hatred of Joseph's brothers grew into evil [16]. There is no way that the mere jealousy because of his dreams, his flashy attire, or their father's affectionate favoritism could provoke them into such frenzied rage or justify them into doing perfect evil. Their hatred of Joseph must have had a much deeper place. It must have resulted from their distaste for his devoutness and other virtues [17].

It is said that on one occasion, Joseph's brothers conspired an evil schemern to kill him off. But Reuben warned them that there should be no bloodshed, as if a murder without bloodshed would not be evil. He proposed to throw Joseph into a cistern where they were sure that he would be trapped there and slowly die. Reuben intended to rescue him from them, but he was not brave enough to challenge his brothers. He only hoped to outwit them. He appealed to the horror of the bloodshed, proposing the idea of throwing Joseph into one of the cistern [18]. The cisterns were known to function to collect and preserve rainwater. In summer, they were dry, and if one was thrown into one of them, he would have little chance of escaping, for the cistern was not only deep but narrow [19]. Then they would tell their father that a wild beast had devoured him, thus making Joseph's dream seem hopeless.

The narrative plot reaches the conflict phase when Reuben, the eldest son of Jacob, has opposed the murder plot in it. However, his intention to rescue Joseph back to his father failed. Then when Joseph's brothers were sitting down to eatm they saw a group of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead. As they came by, Joseph's brothers pulled him up out of the cistern and sold him to the Ishmaelites, who were then taking him down to Egypt. Various names were given to call these merchant-namely, Ishmaelites (Gen. 37:25, 27-28) and, Midianites (Gen. 37:28). It can be drawn from this that they often confused the tribes, for they were very similar to one another, not only that they were in commonly descendent from Abraham (Gen. 16:15; Gen. 25:2), but also in the similarity of their way of life and their constantly changing place of residence. Thus, foreigners could hardly tell them apart, especially when they appeared not as tribes but as Arabian merchant, as described as: "Midianites, merchants". They became traveling merchants consisting of Arabian groups [18]. The North Arabian tribes did live by trade and long enjoyed a monopoly. Their presence was easy to spot, for a group of people sitting on the plains of Dothan would surely see the caravan along with their camels coming down from a distance as they traveled.

Joseph brother's knew that Arabian traders traded humans as slaves, so they immediately pulled Yusuf up out of the cistern, and sold him to them. Subsequently, Joseph was sold to the Arabian merchants for twenty shekels of silver. This price i.e., "twenty (sc., shekels) of silver," was the price that Moses later set as the value of a boy between the age of 5 and 20 years old (Leviticus 27:5), while the average price of a slave was 30 shekels (Leviticus 27:5; Exodus 21:32) [16]. Although the market price of a person like a slave at that time was not openly visible and known to the wider community, this reality existed.

In the original language, The words "to sell" or "to trade" introduced by Joseph's brothers is *וַיִּמְכְּרוּ לְיִשְׁמָעֵאֵלִים*, which was translated in the English Bible as:

NAS: Come and let us sell him to the Ishmaelites

KJV: Come, and let us sell him to the Ishmeelites,

INT: Come sell to the Ishmaelites our hands

The word *מָכַר* is derived from the root word *מָכַר*, which is also used in the story of Esau selling his birthright to Jacob (Genesis 37:27). Therefore the word *מָכַר* in Hebrew can be translated as sell in English, which in the Merriam-Webster dictionary has the meaning of “giving up (property) to someone else for something of value (such as money) offering something for sale, giving up in exchange for something else especially stupidly or dishonorable, selling a value in exchange for surrendering oneself into slavery for money, providing personal money service, to develop belief in truth, value, or desire: gaining acceptance” [20].

The dialogue between Joseph’s brothers when they wanted to sell Yusuf needs our special attention. Judah declared: “Come, let’s sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay our hands on him; after all, he is our brother, our own flesh and blood” And his brothers agreed to what he said. We saw from this dialogue as if selling someone is better and more righteous than physically killing him They used to plan to kill Joseph but eventually they sold him off because it is considered more “humane”. Of course this refers back to the cultural view of human trafficking at that time. At that period, kidnapping someone and making the kidnapped victim to be a slave by traded was an offense punishable by death in both the Hammurabi law and the Mosaic Law (Ex. 21:16; Deut. 24:7). In this narrative, Joseph’s brothers violated the existing law (Gen. 37:27-28;45:4) [14]. So, from the perspective of this case, human trafficking that violates and takes the rights of others without that person’s consent is indeed considered an offense or a criminal act since long ago.

The climax of the narration came when Joseph’s brothers managed to sell Yusuf to a group of merchants, who were used to trading at that time [21, p. 103]. Seeing his brother who was about to be killed and trafficked to a foreign land held back Reuben, Joseph’s brother, and he looked for some ways to thwart the plan, but eventually, it didn’t work [19]. This is where the dramatic scene is shown by the narrator to the readers through what Reuben did to Joseph In addition, it can be seen that when the incident happened to him, Joseph tried to beg for mercy from his brothers, but they ignored his request. This can be seen in the narrative of Genesis 42:21-22. Later, the climax scene of this narrative appears in the next part of the text, where Joseph is shown as the victor and the savior for his people. This narrative is presented as a story climax builder that will invite the readers’ sympathy at the end of the story. Joseph who was shown as the youngest and innocent boy, with no pride or arrogant intentions, was mistreated and even persecuted by his own brother by being throw into a cisternwell and sold off to merchants.

Ironically, Joseph, who was trafficked to a foreign lands, did not just stop having problems. Even in the foreign land, Joseph was still hit and afflicted with numerous troubles. On the other hand, this text aims to show the common lawlessness of Joseph’s brothers in the scene, but it is no less important to highlight the figure of Joseph, who is described as the protagonist who became a victim of persecution by his brothers by being trafficked without his consent. Joseph’s silence about

the actions of his brothers shows that Joseph still respected them as the youngest son. He deserves to be called a “hero” because of the sacrifices and barbaric treatment he has experienced.

The narrative enters the resolution phase when Joseph’s brothers take his robe and killed a young goat, then dipped his robe in its blood. After selling Joseph to the Ishmaelites, his brothers had to plan how to explain his departure or loss to their father, Jacob [17], [19]. A characteristic of sin is that it will later lead to other sins to hide it. That is why they made another sin to hide their sinful act. The deceitful scheme that Joseph’s brothers planned and practiced on their elderly father was a natural consequence of the heinous crime they had committed. The narrative part of this resolution is surprising, because the words that lead to the cruel insult they hurled at their father were, “Your son’s robe Their forced efforts to comfort Jacob did not arouse his suspicions, but rather, great sorrow.

Jacob showed great sorrow by tearing his clothes and putting on a sackcloth around his waist. The things that Jacob did were common signs for a grieving person in the East [19]. The deep sorrow of Jacob, Joseph’s father, can also be seen when he refused to be comforted by all his sons and daughters; and when he said, “will continue to mourn until I join my son in the grave” Therefore, his father wept for Joseph, who he believed was then in the place of the souls who had died, where Jacob hoped to meet his beloved son again [22]. It is clear in the resolution dialogue that Joseph’s ornate robe is described by the narrator as a representative of Joseph’s presence, which would raise the suspicions for his father as well as the evidence that he has died, because he had been killed by wild animals as evidenced by the bloodstained on his robe. In the end, Joseph’s father believed that the claim. This was in line with what Joseph’s brothers expected, namely believing that Joseph had disappeared and was thought to have been devoured by wild animals.

As in the narrative discussed above regarding Joseph being trafficked, many victims like him have experienced coercion, discrimination, and suffering as a result of being deprived of their right to life and being trafficked without their consent. But ironically, the victims who are trafficked seem invisible and unrelated to any parts of the church. This makes it as if some churches have no role in dealing with the issue of human trafficking. Thus, it becomes a serious matter for the entire church to pay attention to in looking at the issue of human trafficking and efforts to deal with it. It is hoped that the church’s call on the issue of human trafficking can help and even rescue other “Josephs” who experience suffering, injustice, and discrimination in this IoT era.

### *C. Reflections Toward Human Trafficking*

The story of Joseph being trafficked by his brothers shows that the helplessness of the victim often makes him have to allow himself to be treated arbitrarily by trafficking without his consent. Even Joseph who asked for the mercy of his brothers described the unheard conscience of the victims today. Those

who are exploited without consent at this time will want to voice their suffering but do not know a place or place that can be trusted and help. On the other hand, technological advances that continue to develop and facilitate humans are also increasingly harmful to others in their use [10]. Social media that is widely used by the public is unknowingly widely misused by certain parties to exploit others without the consent of the concerned. Not infrequently the victims do not even know that his portrait was uploaded and used as an object of trade.

Referring to the fact that during this IoT period, many women are traded through social media without their consent through traps or traps created for the benefit of a particular party. So the victims are trapped in a condition as if they cannot fight and are forced to live the day as a traded object. Recently Indonesia was enlivened by a human trafficking case based online and involving an actress capital [23]. The actress with the initials TA is traded as an object on social media and unknowingly reminds us of the number of cases like this happening before and passing away. In fact, it is not uncommon for people's responses to blasphemy and ridicule of trafficked victims without knowing the background and the story behind them.

Victims who receive a bad response from the community will certainly feel unacceptable and tend to be closed. Meanwhile, victims of human trafficking should be open and courageous in their defense. The victims should have a place and a container where they can be understood, cared for and even helped to get out of the situation that shackles them. Like Joseph who was caught up in a trade situation without his consent and had tried to ask for mercy from his brothers but did not get any help [9]. As much as possible in this time, the victims of human trafficking did not feel the situation and conditions as Joseph had to feel without help and help from anyone.

Reflecting on Joseph's story, this social problem should be minimized and even solved by the community or church response to this issue [24]. Human trafficking in the era of IoT that is fast and easy must be responded to by the community and even the church wisely. From Joseph's story empathy is a powerful way to prevent even dealing with the issue of human trafficking. If in Joseph's story some of his brothers empathized by preventing the sale of Joseph and not just sympathy or pity then Joseph would not have been traded arbitrarily without his consent. therefore, communities and churches need to provide proper and wise empathy to save victims and minimize and even resolve the issue of human trafficking.

Proper empathy must surely manifest from the real actions taken. Concrete actions that society and the church should show are acceptance and not rejection or even humiliation. The church and the community must be open and willing to accept and help the victims to get out of the conditions and situations that set them up. In addition, empathy that can be shown by the church can be in the form of counseling even financial or legal assistance to the congregation or the general public who need

such assistance. In order to minimize and stop the issue of human trafficking the victims need to be given education or financial and legal assistance to get out of the conditions or situations that might trap them in human trafficking practices in this IoT era.

Furthermore, empathy that can be done by the whole community without exception is the use of social media in accordance with the rules of prevailing societal norms. If the public finds or discovers human trafficking practices that are freely visible on social media then the public can report it to the authorities as a form of help and concern that can be done for those victims who are used as objects of illegal trading. In the end from the empathy that has been presented, the community and even the church can be a place where the victims open up and ask for help. So it is expected that through empathy shown by the church and society can minimize and even eliminate the issue of human trafficking in the IoT era.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The narrative of Genesis 37:12-36 is a valuable reflection on the response of Christian theology to human trafficking that is happening and experienced today in the IoT era. Joseph's experience of being traded forcibly without his consent serves as a reminder to the church of its role to embrace and help others. The church should no longer be passive to the environment, but actively support the government or the law in dealing with the problem of human trafficking. Because in the end, this is not only the duty of the state, but also every society, including the church in it. Thus, if the church provides counseling or education as well as legal assistance to Indonesian workers who are prone to be trafficked illegally to protect themselves, the church has carried out its true task of embracing and protecting fellow human beings.

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