

On Human Trafficking: A Biblical Perspective

The United Nations has defined human trafficking as . . .

. . . the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs;¹

In brief, it involves the exploitation of vulnerable persons by coercing them to be held and transported via abduction, fraud, deception, or use of force. They are exploited for the purpose of sex, farm labor, or other forms of slavery.

A Famous Victim of Human Trafficking

Scripture tells the story of Joseph, the youngest son of Jacob and Rachel. Joseph had older half-brothers who did not like him. They considered killing Joseph but eventually settled on throwing him in a pit, which the Bible describes as empty, with no water in it (Genesis 37:24).

Then the brothers saw a chance to make money off of their captive younger brother.

Then Judah said to his brothers, "What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh." And his brothers agreed. When some Midianite traders passed by, they drew Joseph up, lifting him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. And they took Joseph to Egypt (Genesis 37:26-28 NRSV).

Using today's definition, the 10 older brothers were guilty of human trafficking, and Joseph was a victim. The brothers saw a chance to make money by exploiting a vulnerable, powerless person. They sold Joseph into slavery.

We know that years later God brought good from this evil act when Joseph's discernment and skills provided for the food needs of both Egypt and the descendents of Israel. Despite this end result, Joseph himself later identified the evil character of their crime. Joseph said:

Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today (Genesis 50:20 NRSV).

The Apostle Paul said, “*And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose*” (Romans 8:28 NIV). But followers of Christ do not stand by and watch or allow evil actions to be perpetrated against the weak and vulnerable. Jesus confronted evil and suffering, and His church continues that effort.

Trafficking Condemned

Scripture specifically condemns the slave trade in the New Testament, not to mention other crimes such as murder, fornication, and lying associated with trafficking.

*Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it legitimately. This means understanding that the law is laid down not for the innocent but for the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their father or mother, for murderers, fornicators, sodomites, **slave traders**, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me (1 Timothy 1:8-11, bold added, NRSV).*

Slavery was a part of life in Palestine during both the Old and New Testament periods, yet the writer of 1 Timothy condemned the trading of slaves.

Paul also appealed to Philemon to release his slave, Onesimus. He entreated Philemon to no longer see Onesimus as a slave but to see him rather as a “*beloved brother*” (Philemon 16). Paul asks Philemon to do this “*in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced*” (v.14). Earlier, Paul said it was Philemon’s duty to do this but Paul did not want to “*command*” that it happen (v.8). Paul clearly is saying there is no place for slavery within the Christian family, and he hopes Philemon gets the message and acts accordingly.

This notion was not new for God’s people. Old Testament law addressed kidnapping, and human trafficking always involves a form of kidnapping.

If someone is caught kidnaping another Israelite, enslaving or selling the Israelite, then that kidnaper shall die. So you shall purge the evil from your midst (Deuteronomy 24:7 NRSV).

This verse refers to not kidnapping someone of an Israelite’s own tribe, but the law itself was only addressing the Israelites’ relationships to one another. This was seen as such a serious crime that it called for the death penalty.

Kidnapping specifically and human trafficking generally involve robbing someone else of his or her freedom, and freedom is part of the good news.

Jesus read from the book of Isaiah:

*“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor”* (Luke 4:18-19 NRSV).

We can make spiritual applications to each of these results of Christ’s coming, but in both Isaiah and in Luke the proclamation is straightforward and clear in referring to physical hardship. Jesus came to release the captives of all kinds.

Conclusion

Human trafficking is a vile crime against humanity and against God. It treats a human life as if it were only a commodity.

There is possibly no greater scriptural condemnation of human trafficking than what the Bible says about the human creation. Men and women have been created in God’s image (Genesis 1:26-27). That conveys ultimate value. A person is not to be bought and sold, used and discarded as if he or she is merely a thing and not an image bearer of God.

God’s human creation is so important that Jesus gave His life to cover their failings and to restore their relationship with the Creator. Each person is valuable to God.

ⁱ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, “Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime,” *United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime and the Protocols Thereto*, 42,

<https://www.unodc.org/documents/treaties/UNTOC/Publications/TOC%20Convention/TOCebook-e.pdf>
(accessed September 21, 2015).