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BY WHOM WAS JOSEPH SOLD TO THE ISHMAELITES ? (Gen. xxxvii. 28)

WE read in our Bible the thrilling story of Joseph, who was envied by his brothers for the reason of his being the most beloved son of his father (Gen. xxxvii. 3), and who aroused their profound hatred by the dreams he dreamt (Gen. xxxvii. 5-11); a hatred which led them to the heinous purpose of killing him (Gen. xxxvii. 20). Reuben, however, with the intention of saving his life, succeeded in preventing them from shedding his blood with their own hands: they cast him into a dry pit meaning to leave him to die there (Gen. xxxvii. 24), whilst Reuben had made up his mind to return to the pit after the brothers would have left the place, and to rescue him from terrible death by starvation. But it came to pass that neither the ghastly design of the brothers was reached, nor Reuben's well-intentioned scheme could be effectuated: strangers appeared on the stage, Ishmaelites, coming from Gilead and travelling to Egypt, carrying with them, as the English version has it, "spicery and balm and myrrh", that is to say *gum tragacanth*, *storax*, and *ladanum* (Gen. xxxvii. 25)—the margin of the Revised Version is not wholly accurate; to these strangers Joseph was sold, and they brought him to Egypt, where he became a slave unto Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh's, the captain of the guard (Gen. xxxvii. 36).

I

Now it is the question, put above this paper: by whom was Joseph sold to the Ishmaelites? One would very naturally be inclined to say: Joseph was sold to the Ishmaelites by his own brothers, with exception of Reuben. They altered their mind, induced to do so by Judah who spoke unto his brethren: "What profit is it if we slay our brother and conceal his blood? come and let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and let not our hand be upon him; for he is our brother and our flesh" (Gen. xxxvii. 26, 27). But did they really carry out the proposal Judah had made? We read in the twenty-eighth verse: "and there passed

by Midianites, merchantmen; and they drew and lifted up Joseph out of the pit, and sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver; and they brought Joseph into Egypt." We would expect something different; something running like this: "and as the Ishmaelites passed by, they drew and lifted up Joseph out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver; and they brought Joseph into Egypt." Why are these "Midianites, merchantmen", introduced? What is the reason of their absolutely unexpected appearance? And now they have made their appearance, what is the meaning of the phrase, "and they drew and lifted up Joseph out of the pit"? Who are "they"? What is the subject of the verb? Have we to understand the sentence of Joseph's brothers? or from the Midianites?

Nobody can deny that here is a difficulty. Some scholars tried to solve this difficulty by assuming that Midianites and Ishmaelites could be identified; but if this really was the meaning of the Biblical text, the name "Midianites" should have been inserted in another way: the phrase ought to run, "and *the* Midianites passed by". The Hebrew, however, is lacking the article; the Midianites are introduced as not mentioned before, not yet known to the reader; they are presented to us quite in the same way as the Ishmaelites in verse 25: "behold, a travelling company of Ishmaelites came"; likewise it is said in verse 28, "and there passed by Midianites, merchantmen". Adherents of the documentary theory have regarded the unexpected introduction of the Midianites as a conclusive proof of an original duality of tradition. As to the critical analysis there must have been two different renderings of Joseph's abduction to Egypt: the one, telling how Judah saved his life by persuading his brothers not to kill him but to sell him to a travelling company of Ishmaelites (J); the other, narrating how Joseph was put into a pit, by Reuben's advice; the brothers wished that he should starve in the pit, but Reuben intended to save his life; Joseph, however, was taken out of the pit by Midianite traders, who carried him off to Egypt, and Reuben, returning to the pit, found it empty (E). But is it really necessary to have recourse to the supposition of a double tradition? There have been several Jewish scholars, at first Rabbi Samuel ben Meir¹ (1085-1158), and in our days, e.g., the British Chief

¹ *Der Elohist als Erzähler ein Irrweg der Pentateuchkritik?* Giessen, 1933, p. 154.

Rabbi, Dr. J. H. Hertz, who defend the thesis that Joseph was cast into the pit by his brothers, on the advice of Reuben; afterwards they intended to sell him to an approaching company of Ishmaelites, on the advice of Judah, but before they could do so, some Midianites, merchantmen, passing by, heard the cries of the unfortunate Joseph and, dragging him out of the pit, did what the brothers had meant to do: they sold him to the Ishmaelites. Exactly the same opinion has been expressed recently by Prof. Rudolph, in the book he has published together with Prof. Volz, wherein the existence of E as a separate document is contested most energetically. He argues that verse 28 informs us that it was the Midianites who lifted up Joseph and sold him unto the before-mentioned Ishmaelites, the latter carrying him off to Egypt. The design of the brothers, therefore, was not effectuated because the Midianites had anticipated them.

And indeed, if we read the Biblical text exactly as it runs, without any prejudice, we cannot deny that this is precisely what it says. The preceding verses (26 and 27) give us the details of Judah's advice, which was accepted by the brothers: "and his brethren hearkened unto him." Then verse 28 continues: "and there passed by Midianites, merchantmen". These Midianites must be regarded as newcomers. They cannot be identified with the before-mentioned Ishmaelites, for they are introduced, as we have shown before, as a group not yet known to the reader. Why are they mentioned? Of course because they are going to act a prominent part in what will be narrated next. Now then, what is more natural and obvious than to take the immediately following verbs, "they drew and lifted up", and, "they sold", as the indication of this part? The subject of these verbs must be, "the Midianites". Only for very serious and forcible reasons could one assume a change of subject. But there are no such reasons. So we are told that these accidentally passing Midianites, without doubt having guessed from the cries of Joseph that there must be some human being in the pit, lifted him up and sold him exactly to the same Ishmaelites to whom Joseph's brethren had planned to do so. The Ishmaelites, in their turn, brought Joseph into Egypt. That there is a change of subject in the last words of the verse is beyond doubt: Joseph was abducted to Egypt by those to whom he was sold. So, whether the subject of, "drawing and lifting up", and, "selling", is sought in Joseph's

brothers or in the Midianites, in either case the subject is changed in the end of the verse; the subject of "bought" is at any rate "the Ishmaelites".

It must be supposed that the brothers were not in the immediate vicinity of the pit as the Midianites took their chance to kidnap the unfortunate Joseph. After having cast him into the pit, "they sat down to eat bread" (Gen. xxxvii. 25); now one may well regard this as the height of heartless barbarity, but it is not necessary to picture them as such cruel and indifferent creatures that they could take their meal within so narrow a distance that they were able to hear the painful lamentations of their brother. They would have certainly retired so far from the hideous pit that they could not hear the cries of their ill-treated brother. And so it is easily explained that the Midianites could take Joseph from the pit without his brothers interfering. Moreover, would they have interfered, if they had been in the immediate neighbourhood? They surely did not care for the small profit they might get by selling their brother; what they had in mind was to get rid of him, and whether this purpose was reached by their own action or by the proceedings of another party remained all the same.

II

So the interpretation of Genesis xxxvii. 28 seems to be pretty sure. We read the verse precisely as it runs, and need not bother with any critical analysis. In this way we have to face the fact, that it was not Joseph's brothers, but a company of Midianites, wandering merchantmen, who sold him to the Ishmaelites by whom he was abducted to Egypt.

But, so it might be asked, does not the end of the chapter tell us the opposite? The last verse says, "and the Midianites sold him into Egypt unto Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh's, the captain of the guard". Now it is necessary to examine the words carefully. It is not said that the Midianites "brought" Joseph into Egypt, nor is the idea suggested that they sold him "in" Egypt. What is said is actually this: that he was sold by the Midianites, and the effect or the consequence of this "selling" is expressed in the words "into Egypt"; what the Biblical narrator wants to fix is the fact that Joseph, who was bewailed by his father as torn in pieces and devoured by an evil beast, in reality had been sold as a slave by the Midianites,

mentioned before in the chapter, with the effect that he had been carried off to Egypt, where he came into the possession of the captain of the king's guard, Potiphar. Genesis xxxvii. 36 is not at all contrary to the statement made in verse 28, but tells exactly the same story.

And with this statement perfectly agrees what Joseph says (Gen. xl. 15), to the butler of the king of Egypt, whose intercession he implores: "for indeed I was stolen away out of the land of the Hebrews." Naturally Joseph was ignorant of the purpose of his brothers to kill or to sell him; the only thing he knew was, that they had deprived him of his coat and cast him into a pit, and from this he might gather that they "thought evil against him" (Gen. l. 20), but his further sad experience was due to the Midianites: they had kidnapped him and sold him to the Ishmaelites and so, indeed, he was *stolen* away out of the land of the Hebrews. This is not a specimen of one out of two different lines of tradition, but tallies as precisely as one could wish with the statement made in Genesis xxxvii. 28.

But yet there is a last objection which has to be faced. In Genesis xlv. 4, 5, Joseph says unto his brethren: "I am Joseph your brother, whom ye sold into Egypt," "be not grieved nor angry with yourselves, that ye sold me hither." Is this not sufficient proof that Joseph accuses his *brothers* of having sold him? And must not this word of Joseph next to Genesis xl. 15 be regarded as a fragment of a *second* tradition? Now one should not be too hasty in drawing such a conclusion. For it is necessary to take into consideration that Joseph expresses himself very curtly. It was not the moment for long and explicit explanations. So without doubt we have to regard his saying as an abbreviated phrase. He wanted to convince his brothers of the fact that he, who stood before them as the mighty lord of the land, really was their own brother Joseph; he therefore points to the fact, only known to him and to them, that they caused his being abducted to Egypt. And in what way should he formulate this? As we pointed out before it was not the moment for circumstantial expositions; we cannot expect him to enlarge upon the series of facts: that they cast him into the pit, from which he was kidnapped by Midianites, who in their turn sold him to Ishmaelites, by whom he was brought to Egypt, but summarizing he lays stress on these two facts: the brothers were the primary cause of his

arriving in Egypt, and he, who now is the lord of the land, originally was sold as a slave. These two facts he places together in the clause: "whom ye sold into Egypt." So there is no necessity at all to regard this summarizing phrase in a moment of deepest emotion as a proof of a tradition contradictory to that of Genesis xl. 15. On the contrary, even what Joseph says to his brethren excellently fits in with the other data of the Biblical narrative as it presents itself to us.

Summing up we may state that neither the current opinion is right, according to which Joseph was sold by his brethren; nor can the documentary analysis stand firm, which splits up the narrative into two different strata, of which the one told of Joseph being sold by his brethren and the other of Joseph being kidnapped by passing Midianites; but what the holy text actually tells us is, that Joseph was cast into a pit by his brethren, who originally meant to leave him there to die of starvation, but afterwards altered their mind and intended to sell him to approaching Ishmaelites; their purpose, however, was not effectuated, for accidentally arriving Midianites lifted Joseph as he cried for help out of the pit and sold him to the Ishmaelites, as his brethren intended to do, and so he was carried off to Egypt. Herewith an inconvenient difficulty is removed, and an outstanding argument in favour of the documentary theory, which often has been repeated, is completely refuted.

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