

# GENESIS

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Lesson 54

Joseph Travels with a Caravan

As we observed in the last lesson, Joseph's brothers deceived their father Jacob into believing that Joseph was dead, killed by wild animals, when, in fact, they had sold him to the Ishmaelite caravan that was passing by their camp. Joseph, who only hours earlier had come to the camp as his father had instructed, now finds himself pulled out of a cistern, sold as a slave to Ishmaelite traders, and taken in a caravan south to Egypt. What would have been going through his mind? What was it like to be a slave? And what was it like to be in a caravan headed to Egypt?

In this lesson, we will begin to set the stage for Chapter 39 of Genesis, when the caravan comes to Egypt and Joseph is sold as a slave. To understand what was happening to Joseph, let's examine caravans in general and the experience of living as a slave in the Ancient Near East (ANE) during those times.

## Caravans

Caravans were common in the land at that time, carrying everything from spices, balm, and myrrh to lapis lazuli, stones for making jewelry, and obsidian (a shiny black volcanic glass used for making tools, mirrors, and decorative objects, as examples). While camels are a central part of any caravan, donkeys were also used as beasts of burden, carrying grain for example. Often upon arriving in Egypt the caravan would not only sell or trade its cargo to the Egyptians, but would also sell the donkeys who were increasingly being used in Egypt's copper mines. The other components of a typical caravan would also include slaves who followed along with the donkeys and other livestock, sheep, goats, and so on. They were traded to the Egyptians as well. (See Genesis 37:25-36; Genesis 42:26; Genesis 45:23; and Isaiah 30:6-7,24.)

Averaging a little over twenty miles a day—depending on the size and makeup of the caravan—we can try to imagine the walk that Joseph endured on the way to Egypt. Picture him amongst the sounds of the camels, donkeys and other livestock, and the chatter between the Ishmaelites, resting at the evening campsites along the way until they finally reached their destination. This was now Joseph's life, and I am certain that each day of his travel, he pondered all that God was doing and wondered how it connected to his dreams of ruling over his father and his brothers.

## Slavery

Joseph was now a slave, so that meant living a life completely different from his previous life with Israel and his other brothers, back when he was successful and free. To help you better understand what Joseph already knew to some degree about being a slave in his day, I am including below an article that I co-wrote with Dr. Steven Collins on slavery. I hope that it will expand your knowledge of this subject in the Bible, as slavery in Biblical times was not the slavery we think of today.

In the next lesson, we will explore Joseph being sold as a slave in Egypt to Potiphar, the captain of the guard.

In Christ,

Wes

# ***The Institution of Slavery***

*We know slaves were an integral part of the economies of every major culture and society in the ancient world, but we often wonder why. How did people become enslaved? The most common way this happened was when prisoners of war were sold into slavery. Other ways include being born into the household of a slave, or being convicted of a crime, including indebtedness. The concept of slavery, especially in Mesopotamia, may also have included the necessity of working for another (in essence being an employee) for the sake of providing for one's self and family. Not being a person of independent means identified you as a brand of slave.*

*Slaves served in varying capacities from the earliest civilizations in Egypt, Sumer, and Mesopotamia. Large-scale building projects and the development of arable land required farmhands, laborers, masons, brick makers, and foremen—work done primarily by slaves. In homes and cities, slaves served in domestic capacities as well as in administrative and civic positions.*

*Palace complexes and temples required slaves who could till the land and grow the crops that supplied their needs. Slaves were also employed as skilled craftsmen who built and maintained temple facilities.*

*The ancient Egyptian, Greek, and Roman Empires utilized vast numbers of slaves in their major building projects., These projects, in turn, drove the need for larger mining operations, which also required vast numbers of slaves. By the time of the Christian era, the average number of slaves in the Roman Empire equaled three to five slaves for every free citizen depending on the region. Other empires, however, had fewer slaves, such as the Persian Empire, whose rulers found it more economical to hire people to do the work.*

*In the Old Testament, there are numerous examples of slaves as servants. Genesis 14:14 records Abraham's ability to field an army of 318 men from his many servants, and in Genesis 39:14, Joseph's role as a slave/servant of Potiphar, an Egyptian official, is documented.*

*The Old Testament cites specific laws concerning slaves owned by Israelites, including their humane treatment, the process for freeing slaves, the redemption of slaves by a relative, and the penalties for not following these laws. (See Exodus 21:1-22; Leviticus 25:39-55; and Deuteronomy 15:12-18.)*

*Male slaves of Israelites were to be freed by their owners after six years of work or at the next jubilee year, and given livestock, grain, and wine as a parting gift. Despite this commandment, Israelites slaves were often enslaved longer than six years. As punishment, God gave the kingdom of Judah into the hand of its enemies, the Babylonians, as described in Jeremiah 34:8-22.*

*During Roman times, slaves who were skilled craftsmen and had a means of earning an income could purchase their freedom, which led to a large class of citizens known as "freedmen" in the Christian era. Other slaves could be freed by their owners or purchased by a relative.*

*Early Christians saw themselves as slaves and servants of Christ and did not condemn slavery—probably because it was an entrenched part of society in the ANE (Ancient Near East). Paul and Peter urged the humane treatment of slaves and encouraged believers in the early church to treat slaves fairly, but slave trading was condemned by Timothy (see 1 Timothy 1:10).*

[from The Harvest Handbook of Bible Lands, Breakout 2:12, 2019, p.87]