#### ORIENTATION TO HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

A Biblical Perspective on Trafficking by R. Boaz Johnson

What does the Bible teach regarding the prevention of trafficking? The answer will depend on our answer to the next question. Is trafficking a recent phenomenon, or has it been a problem throughout history? If we answer in the affirmative, than we agree that the Bible has a lot to say about how to prevent trafficking. In fact, it's clear that the biblical

answers are not thin, temporary, band-aid treatments. They are significant, "thick," if you will, lasting treatments.

The context of the Bible—the people groups of the Sumerians, Akkadians, Egyptians, Canaanites, etc. readily trafficked girls. In fact, it was the duty of the minority high-class society and royalty



## "THE BIBLICAL ANSWERS...ARE SIGNIFICANT,' THICK,' IF YOU WILL. LASTING TREATMENTS."

to enslave girls and boys who belonged to the majority lower classes. The famous Code of Hammurabi gives us a good example of this. "If a low-class woman squanders the possessions of her high class man, she destroys his honor. She must die by drowning" (Code of Hammurabi 144). Or, "A low-class, temple prostitute who enters a public domain must be put to death by fire. She has desecrated the domain of high-class humanity" (Code of Hammurabi

110).

Similarly, the Enuma Elish, the Babylonian creation myth, says women are to be treated the same way that high-class male gods treated low-class female goddesses. Low-class people, both male and female, were seen as the product of the dismemberment of the body of the low-class goddess, Tiamat, by the high-class god, Marduk. Therefore, they are meant to

be enslaved and sexually used (Enuma Elish VI:5-8; 30-40; V:71). Other ancient religions, during the time of Abraham, Moses, Samuel, Isaiah, and the other prophets of the Old Testament, and religions of the Greeks and Romans, during the time of the New Testament writings, have similar, ghastly views of low-ethnic people, particularly women. It is clear that there was rampant abuse of women and low caste boys in these societies.

Historians of religion tell us that human trafficking of young girls and boys was highest during crisis points of societies. The years 1500 BC, 500 BC, and the first century AD saw trafficking at its highest levels. It is also important to note that the Bible—the Old and the New Testaments—was given its canonical shape during these eras. The Torah was given to Moses around 1500 BC; it, as well as the Prophets, Poetry, and Wisdom Literature were formed around 500 BC; and the New Testament was written in the first century AD.

A thoughtful reading of the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek texts makes it clear that the canonical Bible deals squarely with the issue of human trafficking of young women.

Starting with Genesis 1, we see both the man and the woman, the male and female, (the Hebrew uses two words; both connote equality), are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27). In fact, when both come together, they form a picture of who God is as they become One (Heb. Echad, Genesis 2:25), just like God himself is One (Deuteronomy 6:4).

This is the "thickest" possible answer to the problem of human trafficking, and clearly refutes any idea of women as mere creatures of sexual use and abuse. Indeed, the Bible goes a step further. In the Genesis 2 creation narrative, when the woman is created, she is called an Ezer kegendo (Genesis 2: 18). The word ezer, rather unfortunately is translated as "suitable companion", or "helper". In the Hebrew Bible, this word always refers to God himself. In the Psalms, the writer cries out, "God alone is my Ezer," (Psalm 2; 30:10; 54:4; 70:5; 72:12; 121:1, and more). The status of the woman in the introductory text of the Bible

## "THE STATUS OF THE WOMAN IN THE INTRODUCTORY TEXT OF THE BIBLE, IT BECOMES CLEAR, IS A VERY STRONG ONE."

it becomes clear, is a very strong one. She is a savior figure. This is in contrast to the very low view of women in Ancient Near Eastern religions. The latter leads to slavery and abuse. The biblical text in contrast leads to emancipation and strength.

The Scriptures carry the image of a strong woman throughout. The high point is found in the closing section of the Hebrew Bible, which is called Hebrew Writings and consists of Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther.



The book of Psalms describes worship in very emotive language and music. The next book, Proverbs, talks about the life of wisdom, which is described as a woman. In fact, the Hebrew word for wisdom is a feminine noun: "lady wisdom." The reader is repeatedly told, "The secret to the good life is to follow lady wisdom." The book of Proverbs then reaches its point in Proverbs 31. Sadly, the English translates Proverbs 31:10 to describe the woman as "virtuous wife' (KJV); 'capable wife' (NRSV); 'virtuous and capable wife" (NLT); "wife of noble character" (NIV); etc. The Hebrew phrase, eshet chayil, literally means a physically, emotionally, spiritually, mentally, strong woman. Further, the primary meaning of the noun isha is not "wife." She is primarily a woman. Proverbs 31 describes the woman as a phenomenally strong person.

In the books which follow we see examples of an eshet chayil, a strong woman. These paradigmatic examples are found in the books of Job, Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther. Turning to the eshet chayil in Ruth, it's important to note that, in our English Bible, this book comes right after the book

of Judges. This is done to place the books of the Bible in a chronological order. The idea is that the events in Ruth occurred during the time of Judges, so it is placed alongside it.

The Hebrew Bible, in contrast to this, suggests that the main focus of the book of Ruth is not these happenings. Rather, it is the focus on Ruth as an eshet chayil, a prime example of the woman of Proverbs 31. In fact, on more than one occasion, in the book, Ruth is called an eshet chayiluth 3:11; 4:11). This is how everyone sees her. However, this is not how she was seen at the beginning. The book of Ruth is the story of a transformation from a woman who was sexually abused and trafficked to a strong woman, and eshet chayil.

The narrative of Ruth begins with a famine in Bethlehem, translated, "the House of Bread." It is an irony that the place which was supposed to be the physical and spiritual source of bread should experience famine. To escape the famine, a family from Bethlehem, of a man named Elimilech, goes to Moab where women were treated very poorly. Many lower class women were taken

into female prostitution centers, which were linked to the worship of fertility gods and goddesses.

The narrative of Ruth tells us that the sons of Elimelech get sucked into the cultural view of women, and they "took the women of Moab" (Ruth 1:4). English translations render their action as, "they married Moabite women (NIV, NLT, NRSV, etc.). The Hebrew phrase is meant to be seen as, "they forcibly took Moabite women," i.e. they raped them.

# "THE CONTEXT MAKES IT CLEAR THAT THEY SUFFERED THE CONSEQUENCES OF THEIR DEMEANING ACTS AGAINST THE WOMEN OF MOAB."

The context makes it clear that they suffered the consequences of their demeaning acts against the women of Moab. When one reads further, one discovers that the word, which is used for Boaz marrying Ruth, is a great contrast to the former word. Literally, Boaz exclaims, "Ruth the Moabitess, the woman of Mahalon, I have 'recreated' to be my woman to 'resurrect' the name of the dead... and the people at the gate and the elders said, 'We witness. May the Lord make the woman coming into your house like Rachel and Leah, the two who built

the house of Israel. May you be a chayil, in Ephrathah" (Ruth 4:10-11).

This is a great contrast to what the sons of Elimelech did. They engaged in human trafficking when they abused the Moabite women. Boaz, in contrast, orders his men to protect this woman, who was an alien, and therefore potentially trafficked. Then he redeems her and gives her the place of highest honor at the city gate, where historically the men and women of highest esteem gathered. Being honored in a Rose Garden ceremony at the White House would be a modern analogy.

The New Testament continues with the powerful story of restoration of women to a place of honor. The account of the life of Jesus in Matthew poignantly begins by underlining the lives of five women: Tamar (Genesis 38); Rahab (Joshua 2); Ruth: Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11-12); and Mary. Four of these women were sexually abused and trafficked by men in positions of power and authority. In spite of the horrible life faced by these women, the Bible elevates them to the highest status; they become the bearers of the Messiah's seed. In this, the Bible elevates the status of all women who have been abused or trafficked as a result of the systemic evil in human history.

The fifth woman, Mary, also grew up among girls who were regularly abused and trafficked by the Sadducees and Roman soldiers. This is the reason the most common name given to girls at the time was Miriam, meaning "bitter," since girls' lives were known to be full of bitterness due

to sexual abuse and trafficking. Yet, miraculously one girl-Mary-was preserved. A virgin, she bore the Messiah of the world. Her status as a virgin derived not only from her purity, but also because of the miracle of her preservation. Mary becomes, in many senses, a symbol of hope for all girls and women throughout history, worldwide, who are trafficked and abused by fallen humanity. This is indeed a strong and reliable perspective on the sin of human trafficking. Further, Jesus himself elevates the status of many women he encounters. He knew that his own mother had been ostracized by the higher-class people for carrying and bearing a child out of wedlock. He himself was called a mamzer, a term reserved for children born of women who were sexually abused by Roman soldiers.

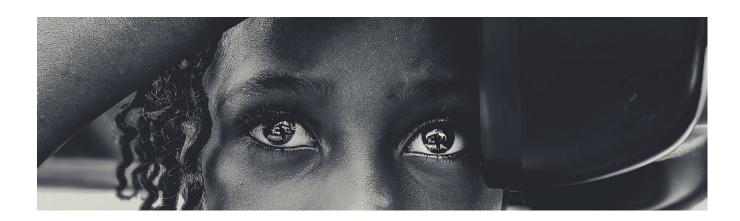
During his public ministry, Jesus, knowing the horrible life faced by women, always reached and restored their dignity. A good example is Jesus's encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4. He knew Samaritan women were molested on a far more regular basis than lower class Jewish women. They were considered the

lowest class of people in Jesus's world. They were constantly and systematically harmed and mistreated sexually, just because they were Samaritans.

During Jesus's conversation with her, at a poignant moment, he asks her to, "Go call your man." She shrugs her shoulders and says, "I have no man." Jesus says to her, "I know what you have gone through. I know that you really have had no man. Each of the other five have sexually abused you and battered you. The person who has you now is not really your man" (John 4:17-18).

To this woman who had suffered so much because of systemic evil against women, Jesus offered the water of life which alone could heal her deepest wounds. The rest of the narrative is a powerful example of how Jesus heals and elevates the status of a trafficked woman. She goes back to her town, and the whole village listens to her words. This woman, who was sexually abused by men around her is suddenly transformed into an eshet chayil, a strong woman.

The whole Bible has one narrative after



another of the O O transformation of the status of women in society. It begins with a very strong place for the women. She is no ordinary helper to man. She is a divinely placed savior figure: ezer kenegdo.

Tragically, we see that throughout history, human beings have destroyed and desecrated women. Evil men have shattered their identity.

Throughout history women have been sexually abused and trafficked. Yet, we see the restoration of identity for women throughout scripture, lifting them to the identity intended by God, as an eshet chayil, as emotionally, physically, spiritually, and mentally strong persons. Women were created to be savior figures for humanity, and in this we find the best scriptural response to the problem of human trafficking.



"WOMEN WERE CREATED TO BE SAVIOR FIGURES FOR HUMANITY, AND IN THIS WE FIND THE BEST SCRIPTURAL RESPONSE TO THE PROBLEM OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING."

# BIBLICAL STATEMENT ON ANTI-SEX TRAFFICKING

Background: The Evangelical
Covenant Church is committed
to the whole mission of God –
extending the whole gospel to
the whole world and joining God
in making things right in our
broken world. FREE is an antisex trafficking initiative that calls
people and churches to pray,
learn, give, and act with our
partners globally and locally.

Scriptures teach us that God created humankind "in the image and likeness of God". and that this esteemed creation is so greatly loved by God that we are called God's children.<sup>2</sup> Yet just a few chapters later, God's perfect shalom was violated.3 The entrance of sin perverted love for God and inverted love for neighbor. The exploitation of those targeted through sex trafficking is an attack on the Imago Dei, marring and harming those who are trafficked, the traffickers, and the communities where economies of sexual exploitation flourish.



With Mammon as their god, <sup>4</sup> traffickers have contributed to the exponential growth of transnational organized crime through sex trafficking.<sup>5</sup> With a high demand for immediate sexual gratification, sex trafficking generates \$99 billion in illegal profits today, <sup>6</sup> making it one of the largest sources of income for organized crime. <sup>7</sup> A large majority of the approximately 700,000 people

## "GOD HAS COMPASSION ON THOSE WHO SUFFER UNJUSTLY..."

trafficked across the globe annuallyare forced into the commercial sex trade.  $^{8}$ 

Traffickers prey on individuals who are susceptible to coercion by luring them with promises of work, shelter, food, and relational support. These individuals—women, children, men, non-binary and trans-persons, migrants, and refugees—tend to be fleeing poverty, war, political nstability, natural disasters, or economic hardship. Traffickers also target individuals with histories of trauma, family violence, drug dependency, homelessness, social isolation, and limited economic resources.

Women, children, and minority groups typically experience higher rates of exploitation. In the United States, 84% of reported cases of sex trafficking were female and a third were under the age of 18. Forty percent of those confirmed trafficking cases are of Black women and girls, and studies have found that Native Americans and Native Alaskans are disproportionately represented in sex trafficking. 11

As a result, sex trafficking victims are not only robbed of their dignity and freedoms created by God, but often suffer substantial economic costs due to physical, sexual, and psychological abuse, as well as diminished employment opportunity.<sup>12</sup> These patterns reveal the intersectionality that makes the most vulnerable peoplein our societies the ones most likely to be victims of exploitation. Ethnic and racial minorities, women, children, immigrants, and those who are poverty stricken are prime targets for victimization.

The injustices faced by those who are marginalized and abused are sadly not new. The Scriptures tell us stories of trafficked, oppressed, and marginalized people. We learn from Scripture that God has compassion on those who suffer unjustly, that God sees them and hears their cry, and that God calls God's people to usher in God's justice.

As a response to this call, Serve Globally and Love Mercy Do Justice are collaborating to address the evil of sex trafficking locally and globally through FREE, an anti-sex trafficking initiative of the Evangelical Covenant Church that calls the global church to Pray, Learn, Give, and Act, domestically and globally alongside our partners.

### PRAY for God to transform our unjust and violent world.

"But you do see! Indeed you note trouble and grief, that you may take it into your hands;the helpless commit themselves to you; you have been the helper of the orphan. Break the arm of the wicked and evildoers; seek out their wickedness until you find none." (Psalm 10:14-15, NRSV)

#### LEARN the causes of trafficking and what we can do to prevent it.

"Thus says the Lord of hosts: 'Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another; do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor.'" (Zechariah 7:9-10a, NRSV)

### GIVE to invest in care and rehabilitation for a brighter future for trafficked children and adults.

"It is well with those who deal generously and lend, who conduct their affairs with justice." "You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God." (Psalm 112:5; 2 Corinthians 9:11-12, NRSV)

### ACT by advocating alongside survivors to pursue God's shalom for our communities.ur communities.

"Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." (Galatians 6:2, NRSV)

We invite you to join the FREE initiative to see a collective movement toward opposing and breaking the cycle of this evil.

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- 11. Alaska Ad Hoc Nongovernmental Organization Working Group on Sex Trafficking
- 12. Human Trafficking by the Numbers: The Initial Benchmark of Prevalence and Economic Impact for Texas
- 13. Genesis 37:26-28
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- 15. Deuteronomy 10:18; Psalm 82:3; Isaiah 1:17, 58:6-7; James 1:27