

Moving from Debt to Freedom | Service Learning



Seven Years of Famine | Genesis 47:18-20

Before becoming enslaved in the land of Egypt, Joseph famously interprets Pharaoh's dreams that there will be seven years of agricultural plenty, followed by seven years of famine. Because of this, he is appointed as a senior advisor and is put in charge of building up the grain stores during the years of plenty so that they would last through the years of famine. Once the famine started, each year when the people ran out of grain, they turned to Joseph, who asked them to pay for the grain.

One year ended and in the next year, the people came and said, "We cannot hide from my lord that, with all the money and animal stocks that we have given to you, don't have any money only our labor and our farmland.

Let us not die before your eyes, both us and our land. Take us and our land in exchange for bread, and we with our land will be serfs to Pharaoh; provide the seed, that we may live and not die, and that the land may not become a waste."

So Joseph gained possession of all the farmland of Egypt for Pharaoh, every Egyptian having sold their field because the famine was too much for them; thus the land passed over to Pharaoh.

Debt and The Threat of Mass Incarceration | Sarah van Gelder, YES! Magazine

The following text is excerpted from an article titled: "Yes, Lots of People Go to Jail Because They Can't Pay a Fine" written in February 2018. Sarah van Gelder was the Founding Editor of YES! Magazine. She now runs PeoplesHub, an organization that offers online trainings for people trying to organize for change.

Consider the impossible situation faced by newly released inmates. Many are poor when they enter the system; along with their conviction comes fines and fees. As one example, in Washington state, these [fees] average \$1,300 for a felony conviction, according to research by University of Washington sociology professor Alexes Harris.

Interest is charged on the original debt, and by the time an inmate is released, their debt may have grown quite large. Finding a job that pays enough to make payments on these debts is difficult after incarceration, especially since public housing and other services are denied to those convicted felons. This challenge is even greater for released inmates who are mentally ill, physically disabled, have a history of substance abuse, or have few social support systems.

"High fines and fee payments may force ... difficult trade-offs between paying court debt and other necessary purchases," says the Council issue paper. "Unsustainable debt coupled with the threat of incarceration may even encourage some formerly incarcerated individuals to return to criminal activity to pay off their debts."

Discussion Questions:

1. What is the system that Joseph and Pharaoh set up to feed the ancient Egyptians?
2. How does this compare to the system that van Gelder describes in her piece?
3. Who benefits from the Biblical system? Who benefits from the contemporary one?
4. What can we learn from the Exodus story to help inform the ways that we participate in and support struggles for social change?