

Hebrew Scriptures

Compared with the tendency in the Greco-Roman world to view work with disdain, the biblical tradition offers a significantly more optimistic assessment of human work, including the everyday, embodied labors needed to sustain human life and community. Admittedly, it wasn't long before the strains of Platonic dualism were echoing loudly through the halls of Christian power, but in biblical texts, we encounter repeated affirmations of the theological and social worth of the kinds of work that Aristotle and other Greeks, as well as later Christians, seemed eager to impugn and avoid. As Douglas Meeks points out, the Bible assumes the perspective of the worker. Its point of view is most often not that of the boss or owner of the work but of the everyday worker.⁶ As the following diverse examples demonstrate, the biblical corpus is by no means univocal in its portrayal of work. However, even as it sounds clear and urgent warnings about work's destructive tendencies, the weight of biblical consensus is easily on the side of work as an appropriate and valuable expression of both divine and human existence and community.

Workers in the Image of God.

In the beginning God created.

Genesis 1:1

God saw everything that God had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

Genesis 1:31

So God created humankind in God's image, in the image of God they were created; male and female God created them.

Genesis 1:27

[T]he LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, . . . The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.

Genesis 2:7-8, 15

In biblical tradition, God works. God forms the world with patience, precision, deliberation, and imagination. God labors with words and ideas but also with God's hands and breath, embracing work that is both conceptual and embodied. Like a master craftsman whose care for the task runs deep, God pauses periodically to survey the work—to assess

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its progress and quality and to take pleasure in work well done. (“And God saw that it was good” [Gen. 1:10].) In its pace, God's laboring is steady and deliberate: “And there was evening and there was morning, the first day” (Gen. 1:5). Although stunningly prolific in terms of outcomes, this work is driven not by production quotas or profit goals but by a desire for self-expression, beauty, pleasure, diversity, and interrelation. God's labor brings order out of chaos; it shapes a world. God builds, forms, and plants. Contrary to widespread assumptions of *creatio ex nihilo*, “creation from nothingness,” God does not create out of nothing. Instead, God takes what is at hand—the deep, the dust, the soil—and shapes it into something new and vibrant. As a worker, then, God is less hero or magician than midwife or artisan. God works not to exert dominance or achieve superiority but to make the world an inviting, diverse, and harmonious place. What we find narrated in the opening chapters of Genesis are the primordial labors

of love. Work is constituted as both blessing and offering—necessary for life itself and, at the same time, site of profound creativity and connection.

According to the sacred text of Genesis, human beings are created in the image of God. As such, we can assume the centrality of work to human identity and action. We are workers just as God is. In the creation narrative of Genesis 2, we receive our job description. We are “to till and keep” the world God has created. Our job as humans, then, is to preserve and fortify God's good work. Our creativity and our labors are meant to support and proliferate God's primordial desire for a fecund and harmonious world. The same motivations and values that characterize God's work should presumably fuel ours as well: work as blessing and gift; work as a means to life-giving connection with others, including the nonhuman world; work as humanely paced and personally gratifying. We humans are workers. We were created to work as God works and to support God's great work of creating, loving, and sustaining the world in all its complexity and diversity.

Work as Curse.

By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

Genesis 3:19

Then the LORD said, “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them.”

Exodus 3:7-8

Biblical tradition also recognizes that work can be a disfiguring curse, far from blessing or gift. Indeed, the relationship between God and Israel begins in a context of

conscripted labor. In bondage to Egypt through forced labor, the Israelites cry out to God for liberation, and God hears and responds to their call. God acts decisively to free the people from exploitative work. The coupling of work and exploitation ignites divine resistance, holy outrage. What we humans distort, God acts to remake and redeem.

God acts decisively in the Garden of Eden narrative as well, and once again, work's burdensome quality is in the spotlight. However, instead of other humans imposing work-as-struggle, as happens in the Exodus story, it is God who does so. God mandates that work will require effort and even hardship. But why? According to the biblical narrative, because of human beings' refusal to live within limits, to accept our own finitude. God's ire is raised as Adam and Eve angle for godlike knowledge (and if knowledge is power, then power as well). Adam and Eve misunderstand what it means to be human: a wondrous and beloved creation of a relationship-seeking Divine and yet, at the same time, finite, limited, and clearly not divine. As Adam and Eve grapple with this foundational misrecognition and the inevitable disappointment of their infinite desire, their world—their horizon of meaning and understanding—undergoes a profound shift. The earthiness and earthliness that had been momentarily forgotten or rejected now come dramatically into focus. The world is no longer a boundless paradise. And human work is not only a fitting means for imitating God and even participating in God's creativity, but also and at the same time a temptation of sorts, a point of vulnerability. It is, we realize—but perhaps only in retrospect, in the painful wake of the overreaching—a primary means of self-exaltation, of distorted perspective, of losing our way in relation to God, of forgetting that we are dust and to dust we will return.

For Christians interested in the theological meanings of work, God's "cursing" of work in this biblical text is an Ash Wednesday moment. It calls us to account for the ways we overvalue work, abuse power in our work, exalt ourselves

through work, and in so doing forget our proper role in relation to God and our neighbor. In response to these tendencies and habits, this text redefines work as a kind of discipline, a check on human pretensions to power, and a rejection of the myth of the self-made man. Even when we enjoy an ideal work situation ("paradise"), working still involves hardship and struggle. The story of God's "cursing" of human work suggests that the hardship dimension of work can serve not only as a rebuke of the human tendency toward work-idolatry and self-exaltation, but also as a reminder of who we as humans really are: daughters and sons of the dust, people of the earth, blessed with work to do.

Work without Meaning.

Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had spent in doing it, and again, all was vanity and a chasing after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.

Ecclesiastes 2:11

What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun? For all their days are full of pain, and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest. This also is vanity.

Ecclesiastes 2:22-23

The author of Ecclesiastes (or, in Hebrew, Qoheleth) might as easily have been a contemporary low-wage worker as an ancient philosopher. The author's cynicism about work is familiar to anyone whose work is toil or who wonders about the meaning or value of his or her work. What is the point of laboring away at a low-status job for forty or more hours a week when one cannot even manage to provide oneself and one's loved ones with decent food, clothing, housing, and

health care? For too many people today, the pursuit of “the American Dream” or even a modestly positive quality of life seems as pointless as “chasing after wind.”

In city after city, living-wage analyses demonstrate that it is simply not possible to secure life’s most basic amenities with a full-time minimum- or low-wage job. One can work long and hard, live frugally, and still not make ends meet. One can try one’s best and still fail to live up to society’s standards. What is the impact of this harsh reality on low-wage workers’ self-esteem, on the quality of their relationships with family and friends, and on the vitality and depth of their civic, political, and religious engagement? When work isn’t working, a pillar of personal and communal well-being crumbles, and we all suffer the consequences.

..... Higher-wage workers may be better able to provide for life’s necessities, but many can still feel the weight of the biblical author’s searing indictment of work’s

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..... futility: “Sure, I can pay the bills, but what *good* does my work really do?” Or: “No matter how hard I work, I can never seem to get ahead.” Or: “I love my job, but there’s got to be more to life.” Finding meaning in work can indeed be like chasing the wind. When work fails to provide even the basics of life, the futility of that chase can be all the more deflating.

Work and Sabbath.

Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. And on the seventh day God finished the work that God had done, and God rested on the seventh day from all the work that God had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that God had done in creation.

Genesis 2:1-3

Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns.

Exodus 20:8-10

Perhaps the most important insight into work in biblical tradition is that it must stop. No work is so urgent or necessary that it should occur without ceasing. No workers are so important or so unimportant that they should not have time away from work, time off the clock, time to rest and be rejuvenated. Chapter 4 will explore the contemporary implications of the Sabbath directive at some length. For now, we simply note that in both Hebrew and Christian scriptures, this directive occurs repeatedly. Biblical authors were clearly aware of work’s tyrannical potential and of the consequent need for limiting or relativizing work. Despite the importance and grandeur of the divine work, God rests—and insists that we do likewise.

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Christian Scriptures

As the previous section underscores, God the worker is the lead character in the Hebrew scriptures. Contra the classical Greek tendency, God is portrayed not as an unmoved mover or leisured supreme being but as active, attentive, and industrious. In Christian tradition, God’s nature and purpose are typically described using active language. God is creator, redeemer, and sustainer: God makes and invents, heals and mends, guides and inspires. For Christians, divinity is at least as much a verb as a noun. We may not know

all the specifics, but we are confident that God is at work in the world—not only as a transcendent spirit or intellectual force, but in and through bodies, matter, and all of creation. The positing by Jewish and Christian scriptures of a positive relationship between divinity and work is captured succinctly in the symbol of God the worker. This symbol signals a dramatic departure from Greek devaluations of work and from the disembodied, dispassionate divinity that buttressed the Greeks' view of work.

For Christians, the additional claim that God is an *incarnate* God means that regardless of anyone else's tendency to denigrate the material, earthly realm, we are called to see and proclaim God's vibrant and life-giving presence in the warp and woof of finite, fleshly, earthly existence. Moreover, as we consider Christianity's sacred texts about the incarnate divine, Jesus of Nazareth, we find in those texts rich and diverse examples of Jesus' and the early Jesus community's relationship to work.

Jesus' Work.

As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." And immediately they left their nets and followed him.

Mark 1:16-18

As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him.

Matthew 9:9

In the gospel narratives, Jesus and his disciples abandon their ordinary work and lives to pursue and proclaim

the in-breaking of God's kingdom. Jesus is a carpenter—a manual laborer who apparently leaves his trade behind to become an itinerant preacher and healer. His life is by no means one of moneyed leisure or ivory tower contemplation. Rather, Jesus and his disciples appear to be working-class people whose decision to abandon their livelihood probably puts them at risk of hunger and hardship. Instead of leaving behind the vulnerabilities and dangers of embodied existence, they sink more deeply into them. In his teachings and travels, Jesus is immersed in the considerable challenges and sufferings of people's everyday lives: illness, anxiety, disability, powerlessness, and loss.

True, he and his band of followers dispense with certain kinds or contexts of work: Simon and Andrew leave their nets, Matthew the tax booth, Jesus the workshop. But they remain rooted in the nitty-gritty realities of the workaday world. Even as they attempt to grasp and proclaim eternal truths, their feet remain firmly on the ground. Jesus and his friends do not abandon labor in order to take up leisure; they do not spend their time in undisturbed contemplation, nor are their material needs met by slaves or servants. For the early Jesus community, the strict bifurcations of Platonic dualism give way to a messier mix. Apocalyptic fervor and heavenly aspirations combine with this-worldly blessing, a kingdom within, and the healing energies of a caring touch. To be sure, Jesus' words bear wisdom and profundity, but he is no philosopher-king. Rather than being above the fray, he is in the thick of it.

If we were to imagine Jesus in today's work world, we would find him not in the boardroom or the corner office but among the low-paid or disenfranchised workers, offering them solace in their suffering and

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hope for a new day. Jesus would, no doubt, have a hard word to speak to today's fat cats and captains of industry, as well as the professional and middle classes who turn a blind eye to the hardships of the working poor and the unemployed. But along with this prophetic word would come a steady refrain of welcome and a heartfelt summons to participate in God's grace-filled kingdom of radical hospitality and inclusion. Jesus and his followers leave their previous labors behind not in order to escape work altogether but to embark on a new, shared work—a work that plunges them ever more deeply into connection with the disenfranchised and confrontation of the powerful.

Work in the Vineyard.

"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. When he went out again

..... *about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, 'Why are you standing here idle all day?' They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.'*

..... *They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He*

said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.' When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, 'Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.' When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage.

Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

Matthew 20:1-16

If Jesus were in the midst of *these* workers, he would no doubt get an earful! What kind of boss doles out pay without regard for the time card? How long will it be before this business (or this kingdom) goes out of business, thanks to ill-conceived generosity? Those who would make Jesus a poster boy for workers' rights and fair wages might likewise be confounded by this strange parable in which the business owner's unequal treatment of his employees appears to exemplify some kind of inscrutable divine wisdom.

If we allow the parable's summative comment, "So the last will be first, and the first will be last," to serve as a kind of summary, then we have an interpretive lens through which to view this narrative's discomfiting reversal of moral norms and workplace protocol. This lens prompts us to consider that the landowner's treatment of the vineyard workers may not be a mysterious game or arbitrary power play after all. Maybe, as with other parables Jesus told, it is a mind-blowing reevaluation of values—an unsettling of long-held assumptions about what counts as work, who deserves to be paid, and how work ought to be organized in the first place. We note, for instance, that the laborers whom the owner of the vineyard hires at

increasingly later hours of the day are waiting around in the marketplace because no one has hired them. In other words, they are ready to work, hoping for work. They spend the day looking for work, but no one is hiring. Perhaps what should rattle our moral cages in this scenario is not the boss's decision to pay all the laborers the same amount regardless of how many hours they clock, but rather a world in which there is apparently not enough work to go around and in which, nevertheless, only those who work are paid. The vineyard owner's inexplicable generosity pulls the veil of this work world aside, revealing its small-minded illogic. If an economic system produces or even requires unemployment, then what shame is there in being out of work? If some are ready and willing to work but cannot get hired, then should they go hungry, or be viewed as moral or social failures?

In the parable of the vineyard, the assumption of meritocracy—that those who get ahead in life are those who have earned it—unravels. All the laborers receive the same compensation, regardless of their output. Interestingly, the parable's audience is encouraged to view this inequity with understanding hearts. What the parable asks its audience to appreciate is apparently not productivity but something else: The willingness to work? The importance of work to human dignity and flourishing? The need for an economy that supports full employment?

Adding to this parable's provocative effect is the fact that the landowner's shocking "unfairness" does not square with the moral authority ascribed to him by the text and, we infer, by Jesus. Thus, the text's audience is invited to look more carefully at the situation: to acknowledge that only a few workers even had the chance to earn a full day's wages, and those few were no more or less deserving of work than any others. Their earnings, then, were a "gift" just as surely as was the pay doled out to those who worked fewer hours. Moreover, that any of the laborers were hired, whether at the start of the day or its close, was likewise a kind of gift. We

have here a picture of work not so much as a right or entitlement but as a blessing.

What difference does it make when work is understood as a gift instead of as a burden, a necessary evil, an entitlement, or even a hard-won accomplishment? Work as gift—undeserved, yet freely given. How might such a view change our relationship to the fruits of our labor: to

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the money we are paid (or not paid), the authority we wield (or don't wield), or the status we achieve (or don't achieve) through our work? When understood as gift, work might not function as the moral and social plumb line it so often is today—a primary way of separating the righteous from the unrighteous, the worthy from the unworthy. Rather than inspiring ego-focused postures ranging from self-importance to self-loathing, work might instead cultivate hearts of thanksgiving and a desire to pay it forward by making one's work a gift to others. Biblical scholars identify the parable of the vineyard as one of "eschatological reversal" because it proposes that in God's space and time (i.e., God's kingdom or reign), the expectations and norms that characterize ordinary existence are turned topsy-turvy: "The last will be first, and the first will be last." True to form, this parable challenges us to rethink how work and workers are understood, organized, and valued.

Working for the Master.

"Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour. Who then is the faithful and wise slave, whom his master has put in charge of his household, to give the other slaves their allowance of food at the proper time? Blessed is that slave whom his master will find

at work when he arrives. Truly I tell you, he will put that one in charge of all his possessions. But if that wicked slave says to himself, 'My master is delayed,' and he begins to beat his fellow slaves, and eats and drinks with drunkards, the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour that he does not know. He will cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Matthew 24:44-51

If the parable of the vineyard calls typical work assumptions and norms into question, then this passage seems to do the exact opposite. Here, the Son of Man is characterized as a master, and the message appears to be that slaves should stay in their place, work hard, and avoid licentious behavior, or else suffer horrific consequences. On this reading, we would appear to have a forceful endorsement of traditional work hierarchies and protocols rather than a topsy-turvy reversal of norms. Even if we join most scholars in viewing the master-slave language as figurative rather than literal—as a metaphor conveying to the earliest Christians the need for moral vigilance in a situation of apocalyptic urgency—we must still contend with the fact that a key organizing principle of work in biblical times was the master-slave relationship. This particular passage features that relationship, with its top-down power dynamics, precisely because it was a fixture in Jesus' day.

Even so, a closer reading of the passage reveals a much less conservative message than we might initially assume. The fury of the master, we notice, is not directed to slaves per se but to the one slave who abuses his authority over the others. This slave has actually been given significant responsibility; he is to oversee the physical well-being of his fellow workers. If the slave fulfills this responsibility, he will be granted even more authority, becoming the caretaker of all the master's

possessions. If, by contrast, he abuses his power and mistreats the other workers, then he will suffer the master's wrath.

What we appear to have here is a narrative about what we today would call the managerial class. And this narrative sounds a clear warning: If managers abuse workers, there will be hell to pay. All workers, even slaves, deserve to be treated humanely—for example, having food to eat and time in which to eat it. The cavalier use or abuse of power may have grave consequences, Jesus warns. According to this passage, the work itself is also to be respected. Even when supervisory eyes are looking in another direction, workers' obligation to the craft or task should keep them from squandering work time on personal indulgences or cruelties. Thus, a text that appears at first to underscore traditional workplace hierarchies is actually a warning against abuses of power in the workplace and an affirmation of both the dignity of workers and the importance of work itself for human living and community.

Rest from Labor.

Come unto me all you who labor and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.

Matthew 11:28 (my translation)

This passage reminds us that the biblical Jesus is keenly aware of the toll work takes. Even in the best of circumstances, work is hard. As someone who spent most of his time with ordinary, working-class people, Jesus would have been attuned to the physical, emotional, and spiritual costs of work. In this passage, he speaks explicitly to workers, to those like the slaves or servants previously considered for whom work is more labor than vocation, more struggle than reward. Not only does Jesus recognize the existence of everyday laborers, seeing them and understanding the hardship and burden that work often poses, but he also calls them to himself for

refreshment and rest. He ministers explicitly to workers as workers, laborers, those who toil and travail. And he invites them to put aside their burdens: the physical weariness and pain of manual labor, the emotional stress of overwork or

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underwork, the disappointment and shame of dashed work dreams, the worries about tomorrow's groceries, next month's rent, or an impending layoff. Jesus

acknowledges the damage that working entails, and he offers a respite from it.

Notice that his promise is not to undo or destroy work's negativity. To be human is to work, and to work is both to create and to suffer. Jesus does not erase or ignore work's complexity or risk, but he embodies a deep and abiding concern for workers' well-being. He also reiterates the Sabbath wisdom that work must not come at the expense of justice; it is not its own end but is intended to enable human flourishing and contribute to God's work and glory.

The Work of Mary and Martha.

Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

Luke 10:38-42

When Christians think about biblical views of work, the story of Mary and Martha is sure to come to mind. Interpretations of the narrative are legion. For our purposes, we might reflect briefly on the disparaging of work that seems to occur in the story as Jesus states unequivocally that Mary's choice to sit at his feet and listen to him is "better" than Martha's choice to spend her time running a household. Is he making the point that spiritual work is superior to physical work? Or that domestic labor is unimportant?

One aspect of the passage we sometimes overlook is its twofold mention of Martha's distractedness. Because of her workload and practices, Martha is apparently struggling to keep things in proper perspective, to maintain a healthy personal center or ground. Her work has a fragmenting affect; it "distracts" her from seeing the "better" parts of life and blunts her awareness of what is most important in life. Given the positive valuations of work found in other scriptures, it is unlikely that Jesus' criticism here is aimed at work per se. Rather, he seems concerned about the human tendency to overvalue work, to become so wrapped up in work that we fail to appreciate that it is not an end in itself but, rather, an avenue for self-expression and communal flourishing. Work is a worthwhile and necessary human endeavor, but it often includes a tyrannical dynamic—a tendency to take up all available space and time and to crowd out other good things.

It is easy to forget that work is what we *do*, not who we *are*. In the story of Mary and Martha, Jesus does not say or imply that household-sustaining work is worthless or unimportant. He does not shame Martha

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for being committed to her work. He does, however, gently remind her that work's value is relative, and when work comes between us and our relationship to God or neighbor,

then it is a problem. The overvaluing of work is just as dangerous as its undervaluing.

Another thing we might pause to consider is that in this famous biblical passage, Jesus turns the work assumptions of his day upside down. In taking her domestic duties seriously, Martha does what women in her day are expected to do. To those ensconced in that highly patriarchal culture, Jesus' chiding of Martha for doing exactly what her social role prescribes would come as a surprising flouting of convention. To claim that there is a "better" role for women than taking care of the household is still scandalous to some in today's world; imagine how it would have been received two millennia ago! The flip side of Jesus' gentle chiding of Martha is, of course, his affirmation of Mary's choice to take on the role of student. Women were typically not taught the Torah nor considered well suited to a life of the mind or spirit. That Jesus encourages Mary's desire to learn, particularly when it comes at the cost of the domestic tasks that are so clearly part of women's realm of responsibility, signals his willingness to defy traditional work roles. As in the parable of the vineyard, Jesus here unsettles reigning conceptions of work roles and valuations, this time challenging not the sacred cow of compensation but traditional assumptions of who is suited for socially valued kinds of work and who is not.

The Work of Paul.

"You know for yourselves that I worked with my own hands to support myself and my companions. In all this I have given you an example that by such work we must support the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, for he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

Acts 20:34-35

Now concerning love of the brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anyone write to you, for you yourselves have

been taught by God to love one another; and indeed you do love all the brothers and sisters throughout Macedonia. But we urge you, beloved, to do so more and more, to aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we directed you, so that you may behave properly toward outsiders and be dependent on no one.

1 Thessalonians 4:9-12

In these passages in which the apostle Paul counsels followers of Jesus on how to get along as an emerging church, work is presented as a positive attribute of Christian living and community. Work, says Paul, is a key to independence. Individuals who do not want to be a burden to others should labor in order to provide for their own needs. In a similar passage in 2 Thessalonians (3:6-13), Paul presents work as a positive antidote to idleness. Some of Jesus' followers were apparently abandoning work to wait for the second coming, but Paul makes it clear that work is a good and proper human enterprise that ought to be taken up by everyone who is able. "Anyone unwilling to work should not eat," declares Paul (3:10). While today's audience may readily connect this declaration to contemporary challenges such as "voluntary" unemployment and state-sponsored welfare programs, Paul's comment is clearly aimed in a different direction: toward those early Christians who are staying busy but who are not working. Paul admonishes those who fit this bill to take up work as a way to embrace independence and avoid idleness, which for Paul appears to include "empty" busyness. The purpose of work, suggests Paul, is not primarily to keep people busy but to enable independence and communal well-being. Work, then, is the proper activity of mature, responsible citizens.

In Paul's mind, work forms and demonstrates good character; thus, he encourages early Christians to embrace work as a vital ingredient of upright living. In the church communities Paul helps establish and lead, self-sufficiency is clearly

valued, and work is explicitly named as a critical component of communal flourishing. Given the tendency in the wider Greco-Roman culture to view physical labor as the burden of the lower classes, it is notable that Paul singles out such work for special affirmation. Rather than being “ignoble and inimical to goodness” (Aristotle), working with one’s hands is treated as a worthwhile aspiration and a valued accomplishment.

Not only does Paul affirm work as critical for the proper moral development of individuals and for communal well-

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being, he also suggests in the passages at the beginning of this section that work plays a positive role in the cultivation of the virtue of compassion. Work is not simply what we do for our own good and to serve those who are already in

our circle of care and responsibility. It also has a centrifugal energy or intention that invites and allows its practitioners to expand their spheres of influence and relationship. Through our work and the commerce it enables, we reach beyond the bounds of self, family, and church to engage “outsiders.” Work encourages us to “behave properly toward outsiders”—not merely treating them fairly but, Paul suggests, learning to love them as “brothers and sisters.”

Even as he highlights the importance of his own hard work and self-sufficiency, Paul emphasizes that one of work’s vital attributes is that it allows for provision for the weak. His enthusiastic endorsement of work does not, then, come at the expense of the recognition of work’s limits. As important as it is for individual development and community well-being, work simply does not work for everyone. There are always those in need of the solace and provision that the work of others can offer, and Paul states explicitly

that Christians are to use their work for such care of the weak. Paul is also explicit in his use of the language of gift to describe the life-enhancing possibilities of work. Those who make of their work an offering to others are blessed indeed.

Treatment of Workers.

Listen! The wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts.

James 5:4

This work-relevant passage comes from the short but fiery book of James. In the fashion of the Hebrew prophets, the author excoriates “the rich” whose wealth and status come at the expense of the poor. Our author means this quite literally: The owners of industry, he charges, have defrauded their workers—impoverished them by unjustly garnishing their wages. And the workers apparently have no judicial recourse.

Sadly, this appears to be a time-honored situation. We might think, for example, of undocumented workers in our day whose employers refuse to pay them their just due or who place them in dangerous work situations, knowing full well that these workers have limited access to social support and justice systems. Or we might recall an industry-leading company found guilty of routinely forcing employees to work overtime without pay, at times locking them into buildings so they could not leave when their official shift was over. Wage theft is by no means an antiquated practice but is, rather, a standard part of many workers’ lives and an accepted MO of some companies.

This kind of exploitation of workers’ vulnerabilities and labor is precisely what the author of James rails against.

According to this passage, God is well aware of labor's unjust treatment. The cries of workers have already reached God's ears. The question is whether the privileged have ears to hear as well.

Faith and Work(s).

For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.

Romans 3:28

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works?

James 2:14

An overview of key biblical insights into working would not be complete without some attention to the great faith-versus-works debate. Paul is the key protagonist here, with his famously influential claim that “works” have no bearing on salvation. Taking aim at his own experiences as a Pharisaic Jew in first-century Palestine, Paul argues that the good news of Jesus Christ is that we humans no longer have to bear the burden of our own salvation by working to fulfill myriad devotional, dietary, and behavioral obligations. Our salvation is a free and generous gift from God, he avows, not something we can accomplish through our own well-intended piety. When it comes to ultimate matters, our work is worthless. Putting aside the question of the accuracy of Paul's interpretation of his own Jewish tradition, we might note his convert's zeal—the dramatic contrast he draws between his past life and religious worldview and the new space he inhabits as a follower of Jesus. To embrace the good news of Jesus the Christ means for him a wholesale turnaround to a new way of seeing and being, a rejection of what came before—that is, a works-focused theology.

Looking back on Paul's theology with twenty-first-century eyes wide open to the centuries of terror inflicted on Jews by overzealous Christians, we can appreciate the dangers of his bifurcated theology—the ease with which his sincere disillusionment with his former religious identity developed into an equally sincere theology that pitted the new against the old, us against them, faith against works—and the ease with which this bifurcated theology fueled horrific prejudice and eventually, with opportunity and means, deadly violence. It is impossible to know to what degree Paul's antipathy toward “works” was motivated by his efforts to redefine himself over against his former community and tradition, but we can at least acknowledge the complex energies at play in his anti-works theology.

We might also contend that what Paul means by “works” is not the same as what we in this book mean when we consider work and working. We have not, after all, proposed that work is a means to salvation, nor that it necessarily exists in tension with faith, grace, or other terms of religion. On second thought, however, we should probably acknowledge that for many people in today's world, work does have an almost sacred value insofar as it enables participation in consumer society. As we noted in chapter 1, work is perhaps the most pervasive identifier of personal worth that we have these days, at least in developed nations. Without work, we may be hard pressed to know who we are either as individuals or as social beings. Given this reality, Paul's contention that “works” are overvalued might be especially relevant for us today, a possibility we have already noted and will return to in chapter 4. For now, it is important to recognize that in addition to various biblical passages in which Paul endorses the merits of hard work and physical labor, he also develops a theological vision in which “works” are the primary obstacle to be overcome. However, in this context, what Paul seems to mean by “works” can be boiled down to human

effort itself, which means we cannot simply equate “works” with “work.”

We run into a similar complexity when it comes to the enthusiastic endorsement of “works” articulated in the biblical book of James. When the author, whom we’ll call James, insists on the vital importance of works for Christian flourishing, he clearly does not have in mind a person’s occupation or livelihood. Rather, he means the everyday embodiment of our religious identity and commitments. James does not refute the necessity of faith for salvation but insists that unless that faith is enfolded, it has no life. Works, then, refer to the varied ways we body forth our faith. In them, we respond affirmatively to divine grace. Although James is not referring explicitly to work as livelihood or occupation, his insight into

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Our work is both God’s gift
to us and our gift to others.
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the proper role of works in Christian living may yet be profoundly relevant for considerations of work and working—a possibility to be explored in chapter 4.

For now, we will conclude our consideration of key biblical texts on work by acknowledging that, for all their differences, the theologies of Paul and James are amenable to an understanding of work in terms of gift. Our work is both God’s gift to us and our gift to others. Where Paul emphasizes God’s gift, James highlights ours. A proper understanding of work requires both.

Conclusions

Even a cursory review of key biblical texts related to working yields the recognition that although the biblical tradition provides no single portrayal or “theory” of work, working is nevertheless depicted in a far more positive light than in the writings of ancient Greek philosophers like Plato and Aristotle, whose ideas shaped Western civilization in powerful and

enduring ways. On the whole, the biblical tradition treats work as a necessary and worthwhile endeavor—suitable not only for human beings but also for God. Work is depicted as a means of survival, to be sure, but also as a primary means of creativity, self-sufficiency, interdependence, and the cultivation of compassion.

One of the first things we learn about human beings in the Bible is that we were put on earth to preserve and fortify God’s good work. That human beings are constituted as workers in the Garden of Eden means our paradisaical condition *includes* work. Work is not, then, primarily a curse but a life-sustaining vocation. As humans, we are called by God to preserve and nurture a fecund and harmonious world. No matter what our particular work is, that fundamentally human vocation remains. Even when work is toilsome, boring, alienating, or a site of disfiguring self-exaltation, as biblical tradition acknowledges it can be, the potential for it to be a blessing—a gift from God and for others—abides. It is the Christian’s job to try to actualize that potential, receiving the gift of God’s work in the world with grateful hearts and making of his or her own work a gift to others, all the while remembering that we are dust, and to dust we will return.