

Work, Progress, and Justice
A Literary Approach to a Problem in Christian Ethics

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INTRODUCTION

Imagine that a family lawyer skilled in mediation is given five different career opportunities. First, along with other members of the church, she has an opportunity to enter into an urban neighborhood where the body of Christ has not been present before by providing *pro bono* legal services. Second, she can provide legal services to poorer members of the church on a part-time *pro bono* basis. Third, she can disciple younger women full-time as an associate pastor because she is also a gifted teacher and counselor; other members of the church have offered to support her financially, though not nearly at her current salary level. Fourth, she can take a promotion to be a partner at her current law firm, a position that will require working many more hours. Fifth, she can fill an appointment at the state district attorney's office; she has been invited to fill it by a recently elected politician. What should she choose? How does her faith impact her choice? What is she feeling towards each possibility?

I intentionally left some information out. Depending on her *denominational* and *ethnic* background in the United States, some of these options might seem more attractive than others. If this lawyer were a suburban white Protestant with Calvinist or Lutheran leanings, options three and four probably seem the most attractive. Historically, they have been the most straightforward positions for this group. Being an associate pastor fits what has traditionally been called 'ministry,' and taking a promotion, unless the longer work hours conflicts with family time, is simply the reward for a 'hard work ethic.' Options one and two might be entertained, but probably discarded because they are rather new and too risky. Option five might be considered based on her feelings about politics. In some circles, political offices are seen as a polluted environment. In others, they are regarded with more equanimity, or even patriotism.

The alternatives might feel somewhat different, however, if this lawyer were Black or Latino from an urban, Pentecostal background. Options four and five might have stronger pull because there is a history of struggle which perhaps informs this person, and there might be institutional changes that this lawyer would be excited to see happen. Option three might be more or less attractive depending on the particular cultural dynamics surrounding authority, gender, and ministry partnership in the church. And options one and two are probably attractive, but commonplace; those kinds of needs have always been there and always will.

Work is a subject that touches not only on major theological themes but many emotional issues. It is, therefore, increasingly difficult to discuss. Different attitudes and assumptions about what godly choices look like prevent different Christian communities from understanding each other, contributing to a certain amount of suspicion and hostility. Some help has come out of theological circles, but the waters are still hard to navigate. While today it is generally fashionable to point out the errors in both the Catholic and/or Protestant positions on vocational or occupational work, the temptation is always to make pithy statements without much serious analysis, whether biblical or historical. Most theological appraisals focus on too few variables, slanting the investigation towards traditionally masculine values regarding work and not taking into account, for instance, how a young mother makes choices about occupation and parenting. In addition, the struggle for forms of restitution or social change has often either been conspicuously avoided or overridden responsible biblical hermeneutics; both concede too much ground to materialism and ethnocentrism.

To me, the situation seems pressing. Following my graduation from college, I worked in Silicon Valley during the optimistic 1990's. At the same time, I lived in an inner city neighborhood where it seemed like there was a lack of stable work. Many of my neighbors and friends (who were immigrant Mexican families) had to work two or more jobs, switch jobs rather frequently, and occasionally had to pack up and move to find new work. This gave them almost no stability in relationships, neighborhoods, schools, and the impact on the children was sadly evident. Why did this situation come about? Why did I (and others) experience so much boredom in the office, and were encouraged to not let work be an idol, while the migrant poor in my community struggled with simply finding work? What did the God of the Bible have to say about this? I investigated many reflections on the subject but was left confused. To work through that confusion, I decided to write down where I agreed and disagreed with the authors I read. Those efforts eventually resulted in this book. What do I hope this book to add to the discussions about Christians and work? If this book is successful, it will accomplish five goals.

First, there has not been extensive reflection on the contributions and challenges posed by Christian traditions outside the dialogue between medieval Catholicism and the Protestant Reformation. Three are notably absent: Anabaptism, liberation theology, and contemporary Catholicism. I do not believe there has yet been an adequate critique from, nor an adequate critique of, any of those positions in regards to work. Most books on the subject are neither sophisticated nor subtle enough for me to consider fair. And perhaps most significantly, there has not been an adequate appraisal of liberation theology's and contemporary Catholicism's social concerns in relation to work. Yet this is imperative if we are to look squarely in the bruised face of the postmodern world.

Second, I have not found an adequate historical explanation for why the teaching of the church has changed over time on this subject and its related subjects. Put generally, the church's teaching has changed considerably when it moved from the agricultural age to the industrial age to the information and service age. We must understand this noticeable pattern in order to be on our guard: we are always tempted to adjust the truth in the ways peculiar to our era. The essential teaching from the apostolic period is seldom kept, no matter what kind of socio-economic climate the church is in. In fact, most of my own research into this subject leaves me with the question, 'How have so many interpretations arrived at a point almost diametrically opposed to Jesus and the apostles?' I will elaborate on this and explore the reasons for it below.

Third, I have not found an adequate call to repent for how I believe the teaching of the church has been a leading cause of the problems we face regarding work and society. Most Christians are naïve about the origin of contemporary work and the influence Christianity has played in it because we are not used to thinking from a canonical, literary, and thematic biblical perspective. I believe a call to awareness and repentance is absolutely necessary if the church is to meaningfully engage the world, not least over the topic of work.

Fourth, the contributions of New Testament historical scholarship done by E.P. Sanders, N.T. Wright, and others have not been adequately comprehended. Their investigations into Luke, Paul, and the historical Jesus have shed more and more light on how Christian language and concepts are dependent on Israel's experience. I believe N.T. Wright has demonstrated this fairly satisfyingly. New Testament historical scholarship implicitly calls for a reassessment of the meaning of humanity in the image of God, the role of Israel, the meaning of the Mosaic Law, the significance of Israel's experience, and other theological concepts. By rooting these concepts in the historic interaction between Israel and her God, and then Jesus and Israel, these scholars particularize Israel's experience, not only shedding new light on the New Testament, but focusing, sharpening, and limiting the legitimate use of the Old Testament. This trajectory of scholarship is easily combined with another branch of biblical scholarship, the form critical literary analysis that has emerged over the last thirty years.

And fifth, the contributions of canonical literature analysis have not been adequately comprehended into the ethical domain. This new method for doing literary analysis arose in the 1970's out of the ashes of the Documentary Hypothesis and source criticism. Prior to this, the lack of a serious literary methodology for biblical interpretation is what has enabled Protestants, for instance, to make arguments from creation with superficial analyses of Genesis 1 – 4. And writers on the topic of work have also showed little patience for canonical literary analysis, preferring to stake large claims on isolated texts, or carrying in unchallenged assumptions about work from the secular marketplace to be legitimated by an isolated biblical verse about (say) slavery from the New Testament or work from the Proverbs. But as Robert Alter said in 1992, 'The new wave of literary studies of the Bible has been gathering momentum now for more than a decade, and it promises to have far-reaching consequences for both biblical and literary scholarship.'¹ I heartily agree. Christian scholarship on ethics has largely ignored the development of central themes stretching from the creation accounts through the narrative books and wisdom writings to the Gospels and Epistles and even into the book of Revelation. Although an analysis of thematic development in the Bible in itself is a huge undertaking, I believe a satisfying analysis addressing the topic of work is possible, the beginnings of which are presented here.

¹ Robert Alter. *The World of Biblical Literature*. Basic Books: New York, NY. 1992. p.1

PART ONE

Laying the Foundations: Creation, Fall, and Israel

Most Christians observe that God gave work to human beings in creation, and that work as we know it and experience it today is a direct, though perhaps marred, result of that command. Work is thus honorable because of its origin in creation, and human work is thought to be a fulfillment of the creation. We suggest here that the situation is more complicated than that. Since work itself is a category that is not directly handled by Genesis, it is inferred or bound up with other major themes. Hence we will approach the Genesis texts via the primary themes it is concerned with, and then we will begin to piece together the proper relations between creation, work, the fall, and redemption.

Chapter One: Creation, Curse, and Work in Genesis 1 – 3

Let us briefly consider what Adam and Eve were supposed to do in the garden. Part of the difficulty in understanding this issue is difficulty in translating and understanding 2:15. Were they to ‘till’ the garden? If so, how? If human-crafted implements like tools were an intended and integral part of the original mandate to till and keep the garden, why are tools not invented until Cain’s descendants generations later (Gen.4:22)? Or if Adam and Eve were supposed to ‘guard’ the garden against something, like the animals or evil spiritual powers, how could they simultaneously spread out across the whole earth? To be sure, how can the different responsibilities from the two creation accounts (spread out and stay in the garden) be reconciled? Too, the animals were not uncooperative or hostile to humanity until after the flood (Gen.9:2), so there was no threat there. And it is unclear how the demonic spiritual powers could have posed a threat to the garden per se at that point; the serpent threatened humanity, not the garden, and that through deception, and scholars believe that Satan was not ruler of the earth – and thus an overtly powerful threat to humanity – until Adam gave his authority away by falling into sin (e.g. Satan says, ‘it has been handed over to me;’ Lk.4:6). Obviously, then, we must look at Genesis 2 without our current preconceptions and experiences of work, but rather with the aim of recontextualizing the passage in the overall biblical history that it narrates.

Our first observation deals with the narrative of Genesis 2 – 3 itself. Sailhamer argues (convincingly, I believe) that the ‘shrub of the field’ and the ‘plant of the field’ mentioned at the beginning of the second creation account (Gen.2:4 – 5) are not references to the garden before the Fall, an assumption which would make the two creation accounts stand in contradiction to each other over the question of whether plants or humans were created first. Rather, the ‘shrub’ and ‘plant of the field’ refer to the ‘thorns and thistles’ and ‘plants of the field’ resulting from the curse, as evidenced by the repetition of phrases that occurs in both places.² The writer of Genesis anticipates a post-fall audience, so by way of contrast, he mentions conditions familiar to them that did not actually exist in the pre-fall world. This occurs in three other ways: (i) The narrative anticipates the phenomenon of rain (which came at the flood of Noah) which would of course be familiar to the author’s post-fall audience even though rain was not actually present before the fall. Similarly, (ii) the narrator anticipates what work after the fall would be like by referring to the fact that there was ‘no man to work the ground’ (2:4 – 5), a phrase which anticipates the time when the man and the woman were to be cast from garden ‘to work the ground’ (3:23). Finally, (iii) sweat is a result of the fall, which is best understood as a contrast to no sweat before the fall. Could Adam and Eve have done significant agricultural work without sweat? Probably not as we understand it today. This supports our hypothesis: There was a significant difference between pre-fall and post-fall living and working conditions. Since it is only after the curse that humankind would eat the ‘plants of the field’ as opposed to the ‘fruit of the trees,’ and only after sweaty labor at that, we are on slippery ground when we say that Adam and Eve ruled in creation by hard physical labor.

Specifically, the only way to reconcile the two creation responsibilities given to human beings – on the one hand, to spread out and fill the earth, and on the other hand, to tend a seemingly stationary garden – is to conclude that Adam, Eve, and their descendants were to spread the special conditions of the garden throughout the whole earth. This is not surprising given what we see God promise Israel: When they were humble before Him, He would cause the land to be a fruitful garden for them. Likewise, God also promised that when the whole earth is filled with the knowledge of Him, the conditions of life Israel experienced in the promised land would extend throughout the whole creation (Isa.11:6 – 9; 54:2 – 3; 65:17 – 25; Rom.4:13; Rev.21 – 22). Therefore we can reasonably conclude that the original human responsibility was to spread the special conditions of the garden throughout the whole

² John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*. (Zondervan: Grand Rapids MI, 1992), p.97. See also U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, Part 1, *From Adam to Noah*, trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1972), p.102.

creation. We were to be co-gardeners with God, intermediaries through whom God brought forth even more order and life.

How were Adam and Eve to do this? Most English translations render Adam's responsibility in the garden in Gen.2:15, 'to work it and keep it,' with the pronoun 'it' fluidly meaning either the garden and/or the ground. There are objections to this, however. The Hebrew word translated 'put' (*nuach*, Gen.2:15) in the phrase 'the LORD God put Adam in the garden,' can be translated 'rested' in this context. The same word is used when God 'gives Israel rest' in the land (e.g. Ex.33:14; Dt.3:13, 20; 5:14), which of course has thematic symmetry to the original humanity being at rest in the original blessed land. Hence God positioned Adam in the garden east of Eden to live in a state of rest, which raises questions about work in the post-fall sense. Sailhamer notes two more objections. First, the suffixed pronoun rendered 'it' is feminine, whereas the noun 'garden' is masculine. Only by effectively changing the pronoun to a masculine singular, as the Septuagint has done, can the verse be translated 'to work and to keep [the garden].' Second, later in the same narrative (3:23), 'working the ground' is said to be a result of the Fall, and is an ironic inversion of humanity's original purpose. If this is the case, then 'working' and 'keeping' *the garden* would not provide a contrast to 'working' *the ground*. Sailhamer argues for the translation, 'to worship and obey,'³ which is still textually difficult insofar as I can tell, since there is a feminine pronoun 'it' that needs to be accounted for. He captures the essence, however.

What was Adam supposed to worship or tend or keep or care for? The feminine pronoun 'it' most naturally refers to 'Eden,' the idyllic place/state of spiritual communion with God, and not 'the garden' per se. In Hebrew, names of countries or towns are feminine, since they are regarded as the 'mothers' of their inhabitants.⁴ Eden is Adam's 'mother' in the same sense that Jerusalem would later be the 'mother' of its residents. This translation is appropriate given that this section is a genealogy of the heavens and the earth (2:4), not a genealogy primarily about humanity, although humanity figures prominently in the story, of course.

What then is Eden? The close similarity between the garden and the appearance, coloration, materials, and role of Israel's tabernacle (compare Gen.2:10-12 and Ex.25 – 27) is suggestive of priestly responsibilities given to God's true humanity, Israel,⁵ which requires the original humanity to have had priestly responsibilities to worship at the location of God's presence. This means that Eden is a supernatural manifestation of God's presence. In addition, Eden has very important thematic similarities to another location of God's presence, the more institutionalized tabernacle: Israel's Temple. Note that a supernatural river of life flows out of both – compare Gen.2:10 with Ezk.47:1 – 12. Thus, humanity in creation was designed to spread out from Eden, creation's priestly center, to proclaim human lordship in creation. Likewise, it is significant that in God's scheme of redemption, Christians were sent out from Jerusalem to proclaim Jesus' lordship as God's newly restored humanity.

I favor translating Adam's responsibility in Genesis 2:15 'to worship and keep Eden,' but whether we translate it as 'to cultivate and keep' or 'to worship and obey' or some combination thereof is not the pivotal issue here. There is a sense in which any of those words might be appropriate. What is important is that in the original paradisaical garden land, and with Eden as their immediate environment, humanity's responsibilities and life were certainly not the same as they were after the fall. Moisture came up from the ground; there was no need for manual irrigation. Humanity's original commission was, therefore, highly unusual. From this central place of worship, humanity pre-fall had a commission to spread the special beauty and superabundance of God's garden throughout an already beautiful and abundant creation, carrying God's presence with them as His image-bearers and so reproducing the conditions of Eden everywhere. This supernatural filling of the creation with God's divine presence (in the second creation account) corresponds thematically with the creation needing to be filled naturally with human life (in the first creation account). This literary tie between the two creation accounts should not be missed. God did not make the creation already filled completely with life; He made creation to be filled in every positive sense,⁶ and humanity was to partner with God to fill it.

³ John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*. (Zondervan: Grand Rapids MI, 1992), p.101, and *Genesis* (EBC), 2:45, 47-48.

⁴ J. Weingreen, *A Practical Grammar for Classical Hebrew* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1959), p.36

⁵ Gordon J. Wenham, 'Sanctuary Symbolism in the Garden of Eden Story,' *Proceedings of the World Congress of Jewish Studies* 9 (1986): 19-25.

⁶ Note that the motif of filling is also present in our relation to Jesus Christ, particularly in Ephesians. We are the fullness of him who fills all in all (Eph.1:23). This 'filling' applies reciprocally. On the one hand, we are to grow up in all aspects into Jesus, who is the head (Eph.4:15). That is, we fill up Jesus' body. On the other hand, we are to be filled with the Spirit (Eph.5:18) and filled up to all the fullness of God (Eph.3:19) which is probably corporate language. As in the old creation, so too in the new: God creates a realm to be filled. In New Testament terms, we fill up Jesus' body, and Jesus fills up our individual bodies by his Spirit.

Furthermore, I contend that the command to rule and subdue was associated with human beings speaking and verbalizing their rule over the creation. Just as God brought forth life in creation by speaking, humans were to tend life primarily by speaking. This ties the first and second creation accounts closer to each other, since the commission to rule the creation corresponds to Adam naming the animals. The possession of the divine image suggests some ability to act in a parallel way to God, who works by speaking. Logic also necessitates it: Adam had to verbally repeat God's blessing and prohibition to everyone else in creation. This sustaining of God's word through the word of humanity captures the essence of what it means to be God's true humanity. Perhaps the animals even spoke back to humanity, which may have been the case since no one was surprised that the serpent could speak. The world of Adam and Eve may have been very close to C.S. Lewis' Narnia, where every creature had a voice and understood the human voice. And the power of human speech is further reinforced by the Babel narrative, where humanity speaks like the creator God ('Come, let us make') and God Himself concedes that 'nothing will be impossible for them' (Gen.11:6), because humanity will weave a story together about themselves that does not include God. Thus, communication was at the centerpiece of God's work and humanity's true work. This may sound odd, and while it may not be vital to the points being made here, it fits well within the orientation of priesthood and worship suggested by the history of Israel and the New Testament.

The notion of Adam and Eve farming is again unlikely if God's unusual arrangement with Israel was a limited restoration of what *used to be* Adam and Eve's life before the Fall. We cannot be absolutely sure, at this point, what their work in the garden actually looked like, but it appears that Adam and Eve in their original state did no farming, irrigating, and cultivating, unlike even Israel, who did some of this, and that is why I believe Israel experienced only a *limited* restoration of the original creation. Adam and Eve were to live in the seventh day, which, textually speaking, had no end; the creation was already finished and good, and it was without the curse. Once we understand how the creation account functions within the narrative story of Israel and all humanity, we cannot assume that our experience of work in creation neatly corresponds to theirs. In fact we must conclude that Adam and Eve lived in an unusual state of rest in relation to the creation.

Did Adam and Eve have to cultivate and keep the garden using some form of manual labor? Perhaps, though again, we should probably regard their original condition as dramatically different from our current environment. Conventional work does not seem to be a part of God's original creational design. The chief contrast in human activity between creation and fall, then, is between living and worshipping in the abundant garden and later working the ground to simply live. Conventional work began because God cursed our relationship with the land immediately after the sin of Adam and Eve:

Cursed is the ground because of you;
In toil you shall eat of it, all the days of your life.
Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you,
And you shall eat the plants of the field.
By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread
Till you return to the ground, because from it you were taken.
For you are dust, and to dust you shall return. (Gen.3:17 – 19)

The original creational dominion exercised by humanity was warped and obscured. It is, in fact, effectively denied humanity henceforth; as we will see in our consideration of other texts, creational dominion is a motif only applied to the Messiah. Now the land itself becomes opposed to human purposes. It fights humanity, it grows unexpected and undesired things, it forces humanity to work intensely to yield the sustenance necessary for survival, and it reminds us of our mortality and impending death. Humanity is no longer in a dominion relationship with the creation. Instead, humanity is dominated.

Thus toil is inserted into our relationship with the land, suggestive of our thesis that creation responded vibrantly to human beings, perhaps even to human speech, prior to the Fall. Now, however, it would only respond to human work and in a diminished way at that. Unfortunately, this work would dissipate energy into fruitless avenues. Obstacles and uncertainties pop up; unforeseen events frustrate our cleverest strategies; and the whole endeavor requires sometimes intense labor to survive, as signified by sweat. Finally, human beings will return to the dust, to the very substance we tried to master. In fact, the verse suggests that people return to the earth without really having made a positive contribution to it. Regardless, the fact of death stares human beings right in the face. This makes the appeal of achievement rather bittersweet. Lasting significance is only found in the love of God, and this is why God's well-designed curse frustrates the attempt to find significance anywhere else.

Because the sorrow sown into work for Adam mirrors the sorrow sown into relationships for Eve, we should briefly discuss the extent to which the two curses are comparable. God's purpose in cursing work and relationships are both redemptive and appropriate to Adam and Eve's sins. Eve fell into a relational comparison between herself and God, so she would be forever making comparisons between herself and her husband but experiencing frustration

as a result. Adam violated his own relationship with God through the creation, so he would forever feel the frustration of the creation's resistance and be reminded of his mortality through it. Adam cannot disengage from the creation just as Eve cannot disengage from Adam, but God sows pain, disappointment, and disillusionment into those areas of life because He desires for us to not put our identity in them, but in Him alone. We are not to feel sufficient with only work and familial relationships. We are supposed to experience the ache of longing and look beyond work and relationships to God Himself.

But there is another shift that is correlated with the curse: the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the garden (Gen.3:21 – 24). Whether we conceive of Eden as a supernatural intersection of the heavenly and the earthly, or the antecedent to God's presence in Israel's Temple, or whatever, are questions not that relevant for our purposes here. What is relevant is that the conditions of life in the garden are clearly removed from humanity's experience after the fall. The garden is no longer accessible on a permanent basis. There is no longer a paradise permanently stocked with easy-to-reach food, in which human beings can experience the Edenic blessing, 'eating you will eat.' Humankind would now work to survive.