

Chapter Four: Israel's Experience of Blessing – God's People on God's Good Land

We have already mentioned how the Old Testament directs us to see Abraham and his descendants as the humanity God uses to undo what Adam had done, or the true humans to which God was restoring the lost Edenic blessing. Israel inherits the creational blessing as a promise. Israel is promised an abundant land, and later obtains it. The nation experiences a type of sabbath rest that has broader resonance with the original sabbath rest in creation. Already, we have seen Israel's critique of human civilization apart from the land in the city; this corresponds with their commitment to the land ideal embedded in the Genesis creation story. Thus, it is important to understand how Israel regarded work.

There is no notion of economic or technological progress in Israel's Scriptures. In fact, an overarching spirit of anti-progress is bound up in the Mosaic legislation to prevent Israelites from displacing each other from the land. Land was the most desirable economic commodity of ancient times, the driving force for economic growth and trade, the symbol of status, and the factor of production attached to power in that era, which is significant in that Israel valued land even more, perhaps, than other civilizations did. Their land was the tangible manifestation of their covenant relationship with YHWH. Yet precisely because of this, land was frozen in its arrangements by tribe.

Even though we cannot reinstate the Law of Moses as if we were Mosaic Israel, living at that point in God's unfolding story, it is still valuable to discern principles that we will find developed further in the rest of Scripture. The primary lesson is that in Israel, wealth was God's blessing for all. What was clearly expressed in Israel's land practices is the ideal that every Israelite family should have its own land. Leviticus 25 is quite significant because in this section we find the clearest statement about God's desire for Israel's use of the land over time and as it relates to family. Israel was to let the land experience Sabbath rest every seventh year (Lev.25:1 – 8) and every fiftieth year, that is, after seven Sabbath cycles (Lev.25:9 – 12). These Sabbath years for the land were more than simply a year of planned crop rotation to let the soil recover. It was an act of trust in God to provide what they needed, without agricultural planning, irrigation, or cultivation. Every seventh day, seventh year, and fiftieth year, Israel was to experience something of a return to the garden of Eden, eating freely from the land.

The fiftieth year was called a 'Jubilee year.' During the Jubilee year, people returned to their ancestral lands (Lev.25:13). Land, too, would return to its original tribal and familial boundaries (Lev.25:14 – 28). Land could not be permanently bought or acquired. One tribe or family could not make a vassal of another. If an Israelite fell upon hard times and was forced to sell family property, a kinsman-redeemer was required by Law to intervene (Lev.25:25 – 28). Because land was wealth, there were very strong measures taken to ensure that, over time, no one could accumulate wealth at the expense of someone else. God was weaving a deep principle into Israel's existence: 'The land, moreover, shall not be sold permanently, for the land is Mine; for you are but aliens and sojourners with Me' (Lev.25:23). God was reminding Israel of their status as 'aliens and sojourners.' They did not, in fact, own the land. God did.

Land inheritance in Mosaic Israel was tribal, familial and patrilineal. A male Israelite's portion of God's good land came from his father. A female Israelite's portion came through marriage. The exception proves the rule: Numbers 36 describes the special case of Zelophahad where his daughters inherited his land. If an Israelite father had no sons, then his land would pass to his daughters, but those daughters must then marry in such a way that the tribe retained possession of the land and the patrilineal inheritance could resume. The Mosaic land ordinances were thus because they were informed by a creational paradigm. Human origins were tied to the land. The gift of a father to his sons and the blessing a wife received through her husband – the enjoyment of the garden land – were modeled after God's original arrangement with humanity (to marry, be fruitful and multiply). In effect, Israel's land practices portrayed Genesis 2:4 – 26. Adam was given the land from God, and Eve inherited it too, via marriage to Adam. As long as Israel lived as God's true humanity – spiritually, relationally, and ethically – God would provide the garden land to Israel. This was the melody that echoed deep within the Mosaic vision of life, and correspondingly, Mosaic justice.

Land in Israel was not owned individually, nor was it owned corporately. As God said, 'The land, moreover, shall not be sold permanently, for the land is Mine; for you are but aliens and sojourners with Me' (Lev.25:23). Hence we cannot simply collapse Old Testament ethics down to concepts of 'private property' which support 'capitalism.' Nor can we say that it supports 'collective ownership' and therefore 'socialism.' Rather, Israel's stay in the garden land existed as a part of right relationships, first with God and also with one another. Wealth was embedded into Mosaic Israel's existence such that they received it from God as part of their relation to Him, and shared it as part of their relation to each other. As part of that commitment, Israelites were to take special care for widows, orphans, and aliens – those who had no connection to land ownership through husband, parents, or lineage in Israel. Repeatedly, God reminded Israel to care for them because they were vulnerable. To not care for them would be to demonstrate the callousness of Cain towards Abel. It would demonstrate that one is not part of God's true humanity.

One might question why the widow, orphan, and alien couldn't own land individually, and that question is worth noting, but we do not go so far here as to say that a different system would have been inherently better, for at least three reasons. First, the Mosaic land ethics of Israel required relationship, cohesion, and love in family units. In a very real sense, the arrangement of family land suggests that the land was meant *for future generations of the family*. It was meant to be inherited through relationship, and given through relationship. Second, the Mosaic land ethics demonstrated an awareness of future generations as much as an awareness of the present generation. It is unclear whether a different arrangement would have achieved more 'justice' over time. It is certainly unclear that Western individualist critics have much of a case to make here anyway, since Western individualistic consumption is creating vast global crises (of environment, energy, food, water, huge government budget deficits, etc.) for which our future children must pay; this constitutes a form of taxation without representation, only across time. Such problems would certainly not have arisen in Mosaic Israel. Third, this arrangement served to remind Israel of God's original creation of humanity. This is how family life in the garden land gave Israel a window of insight into the creation ideal that had been lost long ago. So Israel did not change the basic paradigm for passing down land, which was not treated as an object by itself, but was a gift from God that was stewarded for all people in the community of Mosaic Israel. Human origins were tied to the land. The gift of a father to his sons and the blessing a wife receives through her husband – the enjoyment of an abundant land – were modeled after God's original arrangement with humanity (to marry, be fruitful and multiply). In effect, Israel's land practices portrayed Genesis 2:4 – 26. Adam was given the land from God, and Eve inherited it via marriage to Adam. This was the melody that echoed deep within the Mosaic vision of life, and correspondingly, Mosaic justice. Too, it informed the Christian eschatological metaphor, where Jesus inherits the new creation from his Father, and the church as Christ's bride inherits it through marriage to him.

Property also did not give a person leverage in an Israelite court of law, which can be seen as Israel's protection for the person who owned less land from others who owned more, but simultaneously it also provided no incentive for any one Israelite to acquire more wealth than another. One of the most noteworthy patterns is how the Law of Moses demonstrated the equal value of human beings. This came from Israel's understanding of humanity being originally created in the image of God, and that Israel was to reflect the ethics involved in that calling. In the Code of Hammurabi, a Babylonian law code that was contemporary with the Law of Moses, the punishment for a crime depended on whether the victim was rich or poor. By contrast, the Law of Moses specified equal punishments for crimes regardless of whether the victim was rich or poor, or an Israelite or a Gentile. Look at this comparison:

<p>Code of Hammurabi: ¹⁹⁷ If a man has broken another man's limb, his own shall be broken. ¹⁹⁸ If a man has destroyed an eye or a limb of a <i>poor man</i>, he shall pay one maneh of silver. ¹⁹⁹ If a man has destroyed an eye or a limb of <i>the servant</i> of another man, he shall pay one-half of a mina. ²⁰⁰ If a man has made the tooth of another to fall out, one of his own teeth shall be knocked out. ²⁰¹ If the tooth be that of a <i>poor man</i>, he shall pay one-third of a maneh of silver.</p>	<p>Leviticus 24 ¹⁷ If a man takes the life of <i>any human being</i>, he shall surely be put to death. ¹⁸ The one who takes the life of an animal shall make it good, life for life. ¹⁹ If a man injures his neighbor, just as he has done, so it shall be done to him: ²⁰ fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; just as he has injured a man, so it shall be inflicted on him. ²¹ Thus the one who kills an animal shall make it good, but the one who kills a man shall be put to death. ²² There shall be <i>one standard</i> for you; it shall be <i>for the stranger as well as the native</i>, for I am the LORD your God.</p>
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This 'one standard...for the stranger as well as the native,' regardless of whether the victim was poor or rich, was a startling practice given Israel's historical context. To see that this was revolutionary for most time periods, not just the ancient world, one need only consider how Black slaves in the United States were treated as only 3/5 of a person in the U.S. Constitution, and then again less than a person under Jim Crow segregation in the American South and less codified forms of racism in the North. In most societies, wealth or social standing determined people's value. People who were poor, enslaved, or foreign often did not – and do not – count as full human beings. In the Code of Hammurabi and in many other social codes up to today, a person's wealth determined their worth. But in the Law of Moses, it was the reverse; a person's worth determined their relatedness to others, treatment under the law, and their minimum level of wealth.¹ The God who is revealed fully in Jesus Christ, but in a preliminary sense in the history and Scriptures of Israel, values each and every human life. So much so that this God valued people first and *then* designed social institutions around that reality. In Israel, God's arrangement of land

¹ B. Balscheit in *Die soziale Botschaft des Alten Testaments*, Basel n.d., pp.10ff. quoted in Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, Vol.I, Oliver and Boyd Ltd., pp.32.

developed out from His value on, and vision for, each human life. God was shaping Israel's consciousness until the coming of Jesus. The world – that is, wealth – is God's blessing for all.

Furthermore, the Jews were not to loan money to each other at interest (Ex.22:25; Lev.25:35 – 38, Deut.23:19; Ps.15:5; Pr.28:7 – 9; Ezk.18:5 – 18, 22:12; Neh.5:1 – 15) which put a check on capital, the second factor of production and the driving medium for innovation. Banking as we understand it today, which already existed in ancient Babylonia and the Mesopotamian region according to Hawkes and Wooley, was impossible in Israel. With this prohibition, Israel had no incentive to profiteer at the expense of creation's resources. They had no impetus for technological advancement, and the institutional motivation for economic growth was dismantled. Israel could not make human ingenuity part of the process of receiving God's blessings from the land. They could not link the future to the present by means of money. They could not even describe risk in monetary terms, but instead had to place time and uncertainty into the hands of God. In fact, given that the practice of usury favors the wealthy, as they are the only ones with such capital to loan out, it is not surprising that God forbade usury among the Israelites. Once again we see God instituting laws that prevented the acquisition of more property, protected people from their own greed, mitigated against the permanent displacement of the homeless, and halted people from evaluating everything and everyone in terms of material wealth. The church during the Middle Ages likewise generally forbade the practice of interest-rate lending, carrying over the disdain for usury present in early Christianity and also in ancient Greece. Only with Calvin and his followers, with their reliance on trade and commerce for funds, did Christianity and usury become bedfellows. We will revisit this topic in later chapters.

This separation of progress from human work is significant because most current attempts at deriving a theological definition of meaningful human work are saturated with the idea of technological and economic progress. I will take British Protestant social ethicist Christopher J. H. Wright as representative. Wright regards Israel as a repository of principles from which any Gentile nation can extract meaningful social ethics, primarily from Israel's land institutions. He sees in Israel's land practices principles of economic justice and debt forgiveness, which are, of course, pressing issues for the post-colonial, capitalistic era. He suggests that Protestant scholarship has been largely reluctant to do this because (he correctly notes) Israel's land laws defy the three categories – civil, ceremonial, and moral – Reformed theology places on Israel's law. Wright draws on the study of Israel by N. K. Gottwald in ascertaining Israel's attitude to their land, and his quotation of Gottwald is representative of his endorsement of technological progress. The 'Israelite cult justified the development and enjoyment of human and natural resources and energies by the entire populace [as opposed to a privileged few]...God...knows how best to organize it [human society] to release the full benefits and potentialities of productive human life.' His position is that God's intended the creation to be developed technologically, and that Israel's emphasis on the collective society allows for progress to happen at no one's expense.

As far as Wright goes in studying Israel's land traditions, he still cannot accept the critique of progress inherent in Israel's traditions. The Mosaic institutions give very little indication that concepts like 'development' and 'releasing the full potentialities of productive human life' should be linked to the creation. It is not even as simple as the contemporary Roman Catholic saying, 'Justice takes priority over progress, but progress that equally benefits everyone is acceptable.' The entire notion of progress is called into question. It is quite impossible that Israel thought they should ever improve on the land as it was given to them. The sabbatical ordinances of letting the land lie fallow for an entire year reflects a certain ideal, the ideal of humanity simply receiving provision from the land in as undisturbed and unprovoked a manner as possible. Furthermore, it was impossible for Israel to plan intelligently for the future because God commanded the people to sacrifice the best tenth of their harvest (normally used for future seeding) and their animals (normally used for breeding). The embodiment of future economic certainty was destroyed to leave room for YHWH Himself to supply it. Economic development under these conditions was not even an intellectual category for Israel. Improving domestic stock through intelligent breeding was literally laid on the altar. Thus, rather than seeing the land as an object God gave them to harness, Israel understood the land as YHWH's medium of blessing His covenant people. The land was one of Israel's sources of identity. It mediated their existence. The promised land mediated between God and Israel in the same way the Edenic land mediated between God and Adam. The land was sustained by God (not by them) and supervised providentially by Him (not by them) in correlation with Israel's obedience to Torah, not in relation to whether they used the best known agricultural methods, worked the hardest they could, etc. This is clear from Deuteronomy 11:11 – 17, quoted above. Israel saw a significant distinction between their land and the land of other nations, like Egypt. God would bless Israel on their land because of their love for God and love for neighbor, the original responsibilities of both Adam and Cain. No other people had a land like this one.

This thought is particularly clear in Leviticus, which emphasizes how Israel's land was available to them contingent upon their demonstration of a moral way of life characteristic of God's true humanity. The land's blessings came not because of economic ingenuity or technological development, but because of their devotion to Yahwistic monotheism, piety, and ethics. In one of the major ethical high points in the Torah, Leviticus 18 – 20,

YHWH required sexual ethics corresponding to the creational marriage ideal, fidelity to Himself, compassion for one's neighbor, fairness and truth in all dealings, abstention from sorcery and Canaanite practices of bodily mutilation, and care for the stranger and the alien. To undergird these commands, God reiterated that He had brought them 'out of the land of Egypt' (19:36). And this is also why we have the peculiar phrase oft repeated in Leviticus, that if the people fail to demonstrate holiness in accordance with being God's true humanity, *the land* would spew them out; the relationship between God, humanity, and land was inseparable for Israel. It was obedience, not economic development or industrialization, that would bring forth God's blessing upon Israel from the land.

Psalms 37, 65, 69, 85, and 107 are reflections upon this unique relationship Israel had with its land through the creator God. All these Psalms speak of Israel enjoying their land by maintaining their fidelity to YHWH, keeping the Torah's ethical commandments, and refraining from reliance upon the technology of warfare characteristic of their pagan neighbors. Israel's obedience or disobedience to YHWH's code of holiness even determined the fruitfulness of the land. If Israel lived wickedly, YHWH would change 'rivers into a wilderness, and springs of water into a thirsty ground, a fruitful land into a salt waste because of the wickedness of those who dwell in it' (Ps.107:33-34). If the Israelites were not committed to God's ordinances, then God would shut up the heavens and make the land dry (Hag.3:10-19, Mal.3:7-12). Thus, regarding the creation as a 'natural resource' in itself is rather foreign to the Mosaic injunctions, and, if anything, is characteristic of the family of Cain in their trajectory of disobedience.

Even the accumulation of medical and scientific knowledge is not totally affirmed by any Old Testament text or theme. It is simply accepted as something humanity does, and while it is not reprimanded, neither is it given a special benediction by virtue of being an intended part of the original creation. Greece's myth about the god Prometheus teaching humans about fire and survival in the natural world is actually the opposite of what we find with the God of Israel. God set humanity in a paradisaal state that they could surely study and appreciate intellectually, but such observation would have surely been more oriented towards aesthetic concerns rather than a way to improve the human condition in paradise. YHWH also alleviated Israel's need to develop scientific and medical bodies of knowledge. He promised Israel that contingent on their obedience, 'none of these diseases,' the diseases afflicting Egypt and ostensibly the rest of the world, would befall them. 'I am the LORD who heals you' (Ex.15:26). The partial restoration of Israel to the original creational state *removed* the need for the Jews to develop medical science. Additionally, war, the driving force for science and learning in every known civilization, was considered a prerogative of YHWH, which mitigated the need to develop science for military reasons. Thus, the appreciation of a fine work of art seems to be an appropriate way to describe humanity's intended study of the creation, but the development of scientific and medical bodies of knowledge does not seem to be latent in creation's original purpose. They belong, rather, to the order of survival after the fall. Yes, we are permitted to build up our scientific knowledge, but we must be careful about how we regard this. Scientists are not noble adventurers and scholars, fulfilling our high cultural mandate by discovering the vast layers of knowledge hidden in the creation. Human work is not the fulfillment of the creation. At best we are simply groping in a darkened world and trying to mitigate the uncomfortable aspects of the curse.

The book of Proverbs confirms this. Proverbs sees a positive dimension of human labor in relation to the creation, but again without any appeal to the idea of progress. The wisdom sayings of Proverbs reinforce all of what we have studied so far, both in emphasis and content. In terms of emphasis, a survey of topics that are related to work, including toil, diligence, job, labor, and gather turns up only around fifteen explicit verses (Pr.10:4 – 5; 12:11, 24; 13:11; 14:23; 16:8; 18:9; 21:25; 22:29; 24:27; 28:19; 31:13, 17, 31). The fact that work occupies a few of the Proverbs suggests that it plays a not-insignificant role in the overall category of wisdom and life, but definitely a backseat one to other topics like childraising, marriage, speech, humility, joy, friendship, greed, and wickedness. This is not unlike what we have already discovered and will continue to reinforce as we study the New Testament texts.²

Work is first a part of being responsible to one's family. In a section describing a wise son (10:1), Solomon encourages his son to not be foolish and bring grief upon his parents, and especially to not be deceitful and greedy (10:2). Solomon reassures his son that God will not allow the righteous to hunger (10:3), which should remove the impetus for ill-gotten gain. It is within this context that Solomon says, 'Poor is he who works with a negligent hand, but the hand of the diligent makes rich. He who gathers in summer is a son who acts wisely, but he who sleeps in

² A word first on my textual method. The proverbs are grouped into sections and there is (in my opinion) a certain humorous kind of logic that weaves its way through the book. Thus, the study of isolated or individual proverbs can lead to exaggerations because of the style in which the proverbs are written. But a study of all the proverbs related to that subject, especially the texts located immediately before and after the particular proverb in question will be helpful in getting the overall flavor of wisdom on that subject.

harvest is a son who acts shamefully' (10:4 – 5). That is, there is an honorable path for a son between vicious greed and lazy self-indulgence called diligent work that also trusts in God to ultimately provide.

In another section contrasting righteous to wicked persons, Solomon says essentially the same thing. Work habits are outgrowths of one's righteousness or wickedness. In 12:2, the contrast is between a good man receiving favor from God and an evil one receiving condemnation. In 12:3 contrasts a righteous man being established and wicked men not, 12:4 contrasts excellent and shameful wives, 12:5 contrasts the thoughts of the righteous versus those of the wicked, and this pattern continues until in 12:10 – 11, Solomon comments on the work habits of the righteous versus the wicked: 'A righteous man has regard for the life of his beast, but the compassion of the wicked is cruel. He who tills his land will have plenty of bread, but he who pursues vain things lacks sense.' Again, this classical rural wisdom first trusts God to ultimately provide so that even farm animals do not need to be overworked. On the one hand, all that is necessary for the righteous Israelite is to till one's own land. On the other hand, the dissipation (in this case, overwork!) pursued by the wicked will lead one to ruin. The section continues onward contrasting the speech of the righteous and the wicked (12:12 – 23), and there is a complementary warning against being lazy: 'The hand of the diligent will rule, but the slack hand will be put to forced labor...a slothful man does not roast his prey, but the precious possession of a man is diligence' (12:24,27).

Solomon increasingly comments on wealth, which is of course related to work because it is often the outcome of legitimate work. But it is not always a nice cause-effect relationship, since the wicked can become wealthy as well. And while poverty is often the result of laziness, it is not always so. The ambiguous and difficult to translate statement in 13:7 is followed by the humorous but valid, 'Wealth is a ransom for a person's life, but the poor get no threats' (13:8) which speaks of the advantages of not being too wealthy. The poor do not have to concern themselves with fears and anxieties with which the wealthy are preoccupied. So one ought not to be too hasty or eager to become rich: 'Wealth hastily gotten will dwindle, but those who gather it little by little will increase it' (13:11). Eventually, God will reward those who trust Him: 'Those who despise the word will bring destruction on themselves, but those who respect the commandment will be rewarded' (13:13). This is followed by warnings that 'Poverty and disgrace are for the one who ignores instruction, but one who heeds reproof is honored' (13:18). God will ultimately see that what one sows, one reaps. 'Misfortune pursues sinners, but prosperity rewards the righteous. The good leave an inheritance to their children's children, but the sinner's wealth is laid up for the righteous' (13:21 – 22). Thus, the fate of one's grandchildren is influenced by whether one hearkens unto God in the present. This is again saying that the righteous person does not need to resort to overly aggressive or unscrupulous means to ensure a blessing on one's descendants.

Neither is accumulating wealth the object of work. Solomon tempers his own statements by saying that the fruit of one's labor is not meant for oneself alone, or even one's own family.

Some give freely, yet grow all the richer; others withhold what is due and only suffer want.

A generous person will be enriched, and one who gives water will get water.

The people curse those who hold back grain, but a blessing is on the head of those who sell it.

Whoever diligently seeks good seeks favor, but evil comes to the one who searches for it.

Those who trust in their riches will wither, but the righteous will flourish like green leaves. (11:24 – 28)

The desire of the sluggard puts him to death, for his hands refuse to work.

All day long he is craving, while the righteous gives and does not hold back. (21:25 – 26)

Poverty is not always the result of laziness in work, however. I suspect that crop failure, bad weather, or even an enemy attack go without saying as causes of poverty among the Israelites. Regardless of the cause of the poverty, generosity is due to the poor out of respect for the many Mosaic commandments to care for the poor in the midst of the land. Proverbs 23:10-11 especially recall the law of gleaning in Deuteronomy 24:19 – 22:

Those who despise their neighbors are sinners, but happy are those who are kind to the poor. (14:21)

Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker, but those who are kind to the needy honor him. (14:31)

He who shuts his ear to the cry of the poor will cry himself and not be answered (21:13)

He who is generous will be blessed, for he gives some of his food to the poor (22:9)

He who oppresses the poor to make much for himself

Or who gives to the rich, will only come to poverty (22:16)

Do not rob the poor because he is poor, or crush the afflicted at the gate;

For the LORD will plead their case, and take the life of those who rob them (22:22 – 23)

Do not move the ancient boundary, or go into the fields of the fatherless.

For their Redeemer is strong; He will plead their case against you. (23:10 – 11)

Complete poverty is not desirable in the Book of Proverbs (e.g. 13:23, 14:20) and work is seen as the proper behavior when moved by hunger: 'A worker's appetite works for him, for his hunger urges him on' (16:26). Yet in some cases, the poor can be the faithful ones, and are even held up as an example from which to learn:

Better is a little with righteousness than great income with injustice. (16:8)
The poor man utters supplications, but the rich man answers roughly.
A man of many friends comes to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.
Better is a poor man who walks in integrity than he who is perverse in speech and is a fool (18:23 – 19:1)

Thus, work is not an opportunity for self-congratulation so that our manner becomes rough. I think we can hear in this a critique of our modern attitude of entitlement. Just because we might work hard doesn't allow us to pass a blanket accusation against others for not doing so. Instead, we are to utter supplications to God, remembering our dependence on Him.

Simultaneously, the final results of work are not always good either. Manual labor carries with it 'a reward' (12:14), and often a certain amount of recognition (22:29): 'Do you see a man skilled in his work? He will stand before kings; he will not stand before obscure men.' But – and there are enormous qualifications that are placed on work at this point – it appears that that recognition is not to be trusted, because the wider context tells us:

Do you see a man skilled in his work? He will stand before kings; he will not stand before obscure men.
When you sit down to dine with a ruler, consider carefully what is before you,
And put a knife to your throat if you are a man of great appetite.
Do not desire his delicacies, for it is deceptive food.
Do not weary yourself to gain wealth, cease from your consideration of it.
When you set your eyes on it, it is gone.
For wealth certainly makes itself wings, like an eagle that flies toward the heavens
Do not desire the bread of a selfish man, or desire his delicacies.
For as he thinks within himself, so he is.
He says to you, 'Eat and drink!' But his heart is not with you
You will vomit up the morsel you have eaten, and waste your compliments. (22:29 – 23:8)

This ironic juxtaposition bears witness to a relatively sophisticated Israelite view of work and society. The fame that can and usually does accrue to a skilled worker must be held askance. A certain amount of faithfulness and diligence can get a person promoted quickly, but the local politicians and the wealthy will come along and, intentionally or unintentionally, dangle temptations and enticements in front of that person which will dupe and enslave that person away from a simple life. This is excellent wisdom for people who are continually tempted and enticed by promotions. We must not weary ourselves with work to gain wealth. In fact, we must even stop daydreaming about what it would be like to pull down a huge salary like some of the people around us do. Wealth will evaporate more easily than it comes, leaving us feeling robbed and swindled. Therefore we must not envy the selfish for what they have and for the selfishly hedonistic lifestyle in which they indulge after they have worked and schemed so hard to attain that lifestyle. Their company, even a brief shared meal, will be a nauseating experience.

Proverbs raises an important question for Christians: How does the book apply to Christians? Walther Zimmerli in his works and Walter Brueggeman in *In Man We Trust* argue that because wisdom, and Proverbs in particular, is grounded in 'creation theology,' Proverbs must be applicable to all humanity without serious qualification, not just to Israel alone. This suits Brueggeman, for instance, because he desires to fashion a world-affirming church rather than a world-denying one. Yet making these generalizations under the 'creation theology' banner is not so easy. Creation as God made it was only experienced by the people of Israel, and only in a limited sense. No ancient people known to us could have lived by the book of Proverbs. For instance, the ancient Greeks had an aversion to usury, but Greece's sea-faring culture was totally foreign to Israel. The assumptions about land, usury, etc. fit only Israel, as do the references to the Mosaic Law in 28:7 – 9 (see below), which also challenges the notion that creation theology can be separated from Israel's salvation history. We already noted that Israel's doctrine of creation is a fighting doctrine. Though it does affirm YHWH's concern for humanity at large, it nevertheless singled out Israel as a special people while seeing the rest as living in the trajectory of Cain and Nimrod.

In view of this, it is not easy to translate Proverbs into an urban environment outside pre-Messianic Israel where many of us are not working directly on the land by performing manual labor, where none of us have the benefit of the Mosaic stipulations concerning material provision, and where all of us are faced with massive, quick shifts in the work environment. One small section in particular stands out because it condemns sophisticated financial practices that lead one away from manual labor on the land:

He who keeps the Law is a discerning son,
But he who is a companion of gluttonous men humiliates his father.
He who increases his wealth by interest and usury
Gathers it for him who is gracious to the poor.
He who turns away his ear from listening to the Law,
Even his prayer is an abomination. (28:7 – 9)

Moses originally condemned usury as a financial practice among Israelites (e.g. Deut.23:19), hence the references to the Law have such passages in mind. Usury, or interest rates, provides a way to tie risk to return, to tie the future to the present through the medium of money, to offer a very easy way for the wealthy to get wealthier, to convert nature into money, and to otherwise permanently introduce instability and materialism into human life by promoting the growth of material wealth via acquisitiveness and exploitation of the creation. It is no surprise that usury was frowned upon by the ancient Jews, the early Christians, and even the ancient Greeks. In Proverbs, God will deal with a person who dabbles with interest and usury in such a way that all wealth will be stripped from him and be given to someone who is gracious to the poor. The money will not even be given to the poor directly, but to a faithful person who will bring praise to God's name by his or her compassion. Given this strong sentiment, it is disturbing to consider that our entire civilization seems to hang on usury to keep it going. We need only consider the attention paid to the central banks of all industrialized nations. Hence it is difficult to know what to say about proverbs like these.

This is also true for the proverb that tells us to work in the fields before building a house (24:27). It is possible for some to take this as 'prioritize work over home.' It may be true for us that having an income logically precedes paying rent or a mortgage. But the proverb fundamentally presumes a rural Israelite life where the size of one's field is fixed by tribal and family apportioning and where seeding and watering will be done at some point. We do not have those same parameters today since work can expand according to our inclinations and can be never-ending even on a daily basis, so it would be questionable to constantly make decisions to prioritize work over home and family under the sanction of this verse. We will detail more thoughts about this when we study stewardship and major parts of the New Testament.

Proverbs speaks of the physical land of Israel. The book reflects the Mosaic requirements concerning land and Joshua's apportioning the land into fixed areas by tribe and family. Because of the rural outlook of ancient Israel, that God's chosen people enjoys God's chosen land, and especially because God stipulated in the Mosaic covenant that He would materially provide for the Jews in the land, there was an easily identifiable correlation between faithfulness, work within certain bounds, and provision from God. Thus I agree with John Goldingay: 'It is only people who know the Yahweh who made himself known in Israel's history who experience and describe life and the world as Proverbs and Psalms do.'³

Yet another question about application intrudes: If, as we will study in the next chapter, Jesus made the rest and bounty of the land an outward metaphor of the inward spiritual rest and bounty found in him through the Spirit, as witnessed by Hebrews 3:12 – 4:13, then what impact does this have for us? The attitude of Jesus towards wealth is radically different from that of Israel since Jesus divorced the Israelites from their ancestral land, relegated it to the demonic category Mammon, commanded material sacrifice in a multitude of ways, promised a minimum level of material provision from God (like Jesus himself had) not an abundant one (like Israel had), and sent them out beyond Israel's borders. Another category affected is justice. When the wisdom writers, the prophets, or the psalmists speak of justice, it is specifically Mosaic covenantal justice that they are referring to, which involves the restitution of the land according to its original tribal and familial designations. It has to do with the Mosaic social legislation for the poor, the Jubilee principle, the kinsman-redeemer, the anti-urban emphasis, the law of gleaning in a rural environment, and all those things that are bound up with a return to Mosaic covenant faithfulness. Israelite justice meant something very specific. However, out of a desire to make those texts more relevant, Christians tend to insert whatever current definitions of justice, wealth, or work we adhere to into the Hebrew Scriptures. This is how liberation theology and the Protestant work ethic tend to appropriate these texts. Unfortunately, this is not accurate, as we will study in the next chapter. Moreover, Christians tend to have varying attitudes towards wealth, largely by retreating to a phase of redemption history that is not current, namely Israel's phase. This is also inaccurate. We have responsibilities that are not derived from Israel, and it can be misleading to recall Israel's responsibilities because theirs are insufficient and inaccurate for us.

It is therefore inappropriate to say that Proverbs teaches Christians a simple ethic of 'work hard at whatever you do.' Proverbs specifically exalts a simple Israelite farming life, elevates manual labor, and frowns on other ways to earn a living, particularly the world of complex finances. This is a challenging point to consider. Furthermore,

³ John Goldingay, *Theological Diversity and the Authority of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), p.232

work is a part of life, but it is definitely not all of life. This is especially seen in how Proverbs in its initial chapters anthropomorphizes wisdom as a woman, and then in its final chapter we find an actual wife who physically embodies that wisdom. This is an interesting dimension to practical spiritual wisdom, that in a book formatted as a letter from a father to his son, one of the best pieces of advice this father could give is basically, 'Find a godly wife.' Work is of course a part of that envisioned life, since the wife among other things is an excellent worker, but even this is within the context of her family. In fact, in being so concerned with how to live in the promised land, and in culminating with an ideal of human marriage, Proverbs seems to be informed structurally and materially by the themes and ideals of Genesis 1:1 – 2:3 and Genesis 2:4 – 26, an analysis I have not yet seen done. Proverbs is ultimately relational and has relational concerns at its heart. It would be entirely inappropriate and against the spirit of the book to take it any other way. As we have found from Genesis and Ecclesiastes, Proverbs does not exalt work for its own sake. The book does not suggest that we should look to change jobs for more job satisfaction since the Jews were content with a simple life of farming. It does not recommend putting more importance on work than on relationships. It most assuredly does not support any notion of 'progress.'

Thus, C.J.H. Wright does not press far enough into the theological role of Israel. Not only does he fail to consider what Jesus Christ does to the theme of Israel's land, he picks and chooses arbitrarily from what Israel's land traditions mean. One simply cannot take the institution of Israel's land, wrench one idea out of it (a relatively egalitarian economic distribution of resources) and throw out all the others (no technological development, significant barriers to economic planning, no usury, land passed down strictly through patrilineal lines, the responsibility of family members to restore lost land, regular and complete sabbath rest, the fertility of the land determined by the people's holiness, and most importantly, the absolute uniqueness of Israel as a nation blessed by God). Wright and Gottwald draw such conclusions because of their prior commitment to the notion of economic progress and their attempt to preserve a positive place for it within a biblical theology. We will consider the Israelite notions of justice later and how considerations of justice can and cannot apply to work today, but for now, we conclude with an evaluation of Wright's work: As an Englishman, he is admirably willing to challenge the history of British imperialism and colonialism. But though he can challenge injustice, he does not challenge the idea of progress or analyze that notion more deeply. He can challenge British colonialism, but he does not challenge the British Industrial Revolution that went hand in hand with it. Hence his methodology of appropriating the Old Testament is flawed, and his articulation of socio-economic forces in history is deficient as well. Technological or economic progress never receives a proverbial nod of the head, much less theoretical endorsement from the Bible. Working for the sake of such progress is an Enlightenment belief that finds no anchor in the Old Testament, nor, as we shall see, the New.