

Reformed Faith & Practice



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In This Issue

This issue features lectures given at the second colloquium of the Institute for Faith, Work, and Culture (IFWC) at Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando, in 2025. Whereas the inaugural colloquium of the previous year considered the topic of faith and work from the perspective of systematic theology (see *RFP* 9.1 [2024]), the 2025 colloquium did so from the perspective of the Old Testament. Also included is a brief introduction to the IFWC by its director, Damein Schitter. The editors are grateful to each of the five presenters for offering their presentations for inclusion in this issue.

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Studies in Faith, Work, and Culture: Introduction

Damein Schitter

Institute for Faith, Work, and Culture, Orlando

One of the most significant developments in evangelical Christianity over the past several decades is the “faith and work” (FAW) movement. This movement seeks to help Christians cultivate an integrated approach to their faith and work. Convinced that a Christian’s work should be neither a mere instrument for personal gain nor an idol that defines their identity, the FAW movement emphasizes the God-given nature of work, calling for it to be ordered toward God’s glory and human flourishing.

Initially, the FAW movement was predominantly lay led, with churches and Christian institutions slow to join the conversation. In its early phase, the movement focused on persuading Christians that the integration of faith and work matters. Many participants came to the profound realization: “My work matters to God.” Now, the movement is maturing, shifting to address the more complex question: “How does my particular work reflect God’s purpose?” This deepening inquiry represents the next step in the development of the FAW conversation.

As the triune God exercises sovereignty over all spheres of life, he calls his people to serve him in all spheres of labor. Understanding how to serve God well in our work requires a vision that connects our vocation with God’s sovereign design. Good work—work that glorifies God and serves the common good—acknowledges our dependence on God’s provision, follows the wisdom of his guidance, and stewards his common grace. The Institute for Faith, Work, and Culture (IFWC) at Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando seeks to equip pastors and leaders with a God-centered vision of work. It provides formal and nonformal training in biblical, theological, and applied foundations essential to cultivating a Reformed vision of faith, work, and culture. IFWC aims to bring the resources of Reformed theology to the faith and work conversation, offering students and leaders opportunities to learn from FAW experts and apply these principles to diverse communities.

A key initiative in IFWC’s vision is a series of colloquia designed to foster research and discussion that culminate in specialized issues of *Reformed Faith & Practice*. These issues feature high-quality scholarship, furthering the theological depth of the faith and

work conversation. The Old Testament is the focus of the second colloquium. By inviting leaders and stakeholders in the FAW movement to join each colloquium, IFWC aims to continue expanding the horizons of the movement, promoting a holistic, God-glorifying approach to work in the modern world.

The FAW movement has often focused on certain topics while ignoring or underexploring others. We hope these studies not only add new rigor to familiar doctrines but also bring oft-ignored doctrines into play. The movement will only be the stronger for its further consideration of the whole counsel of God.

The Old Testament as Christian Scripture for Vocational Discipleship

Peter Y. Lee

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The Scriptures clearly teach that faithfulness to the Lord is not limited to the parameters of the church. Whenever Christians go into the public arenas of society, they are to remain faithful to the Lord by fulfilling their secular duties with excellence. Such an act is not considered by the New Testament writers as a lesser form of Christian living, but rather another way to express true fidelity to the Lord. The Apostle Paul makes precisely this point when, in Colossians 3:22–23, he instructs believers who are bondservants to “obey in everything those who are your earthly masters” (ESV). In fact, he makes this abundantly clear when he further articulates the nature of this obedience “not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord” (ESV). Not only does he describe what faithfulness in a public sphere should not look like, but he goes on to describe what it should positively look like: “whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men” (Col 3:23 ESV). In other words, Paul says serve well even your earthly masters because in reality you serve the Lord. This service includes all aspects of life, from our home, our church, and our careers. When Paul says this, he is borrowing from an Old Testament virtue that calls God’s people to be faithful in the totality of their lives. The purpose of this essay is to trace the Old Testament background to such a call to life that includes the private to the public areas of life, from worship of God to our vocational callings. We will begin with an examination of two key Old Testament texts: Deuteronomy 6, which calls us to love God in every aspect of our lives and Genesis 1–2, which shows that love for God is expressed in humanity’s worship and cultural tasks. From there, we will look at two examples of people who loved God in their worship and vocation, Solomon and Daniel.

The Importance of Deuteronomy 6

It is difficult not to begin this discussion of an Old Testament approach to holistic discipleship with Deuteronomy 6:4–9. This passage is known as the *shema* as it is the first Hebrew word in verse 4 (*shema*, the imperative to “hear” with an ethical overtone, meaning “to heed” or “obey”). Its importance is best illustrated by the fact that our Lord cites it as the “great and first” commandment in Matthew 22:37–38.

Verse four can easily be overlooked. To do so, however, would be to miss a key foundation for covenantal discipleship. After the initial exhortation to “heed,” this opening verse states the Lord is both “our” God and “one” God. Though the specific translation of the Hebrew is uncertain, the message is not. By calling him “our” God, the corporate community of Israel is identified as the recipient of this mandate (not an individual). By calling him “one” God, the Lord claims to be the one and only God, in contrast to the surrounding nations who appeal to multiple lesser deities. In addition to this, the divine name (Yahweh, the LORD) is used. By using the covenant name, a clearer identity of God is made. This is the same God who liberated the previous generation from harsh labor in Egypt (Exod 6:1–8), who provided and protected them during the forty-year wanderings of the wilderness, who is fulfilling his covenantal promises to their ancient forefathers of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The Israelites are, therefore, included as members of a holy community that has professed Yahweh as their God—a community that goes as far back as the days of Noah (Gen 4:25–26), possibly even Adam.

By introducing the identity of the Lord at the outset of this passage, Deuteronomy 6 establishes Israel’s God as their covenant Lord and Israel as his vassal people. This is the context in which they are called to “love the LORD” in verse five, thus confirming the identity of the divine sovereign *prior* to the covenant commandments. By doing this, Deuteronomy 6 engages in standard treaty operating procedure by which the suzerain establishes his identity and great accomplishments in order to encourage covenant fidelity from his vassal. This identification of God has a direct effect on Israel. Because of the Lord’s redemptive work, Israel is a transformed people—from enslaved to redeemed. The stipulation to love is given based on this new identity. In other words, verse four does not only indicate the Lord’s identity, but Israel’s as well. They are told that they are a liberated people so that they can do what they were unable to do in Egypt, worship and follow his holy commands.

New Testament discipleship is based on this fundamental Old Testament premise, that the imperatives of the believers (i.e., Christian living) rests on their indicative (i.e., transformation through the redemptive work of Christ). This is the reason why, when Scripture describes the life of the believer, it does not begin by focusing on duties and requirements. Instead, it begins with the redemptive work of God. Only when we properly acknowledge what the Lord has made us can we have any hope of living out our calling. Such is the case with Israel in the Old Testament, and thus Deuteronomy 6 begins with a fundamental doctrine of God.¹

¹ Notice Deut 6:20–25 where a child asks about the commandments. The response is not to begin by commenting on the commandments, but rather by remembering the redemptive work of God.

Once this theological foundation has been laid, Deuteronomy 6 moves on to the requirement for the people, to “love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (6:5 ESV). Since this immediately follows the ten commandments (5:1–21), the implication is Israel can show their love for God by obeying these commandments. Given this connection, three exegetical observations demonstrate that this call to love God is not limited to one sphere of Israel’s life but rather is all-encompassing. The first is regarding the extent of its recipients. This call transcends age, demographics, and generations. Notice that Israelite parents first are encouraged to love the Lord, then they are to pass this virtue onto their children (v.7). The book of Deuteronomy envisions covenant faithfulness as a virtue that is passed on from one generation to the next, until the entire nation becomes a God-fearing people (sadly, this vision is unrealized).

The second observation is that this call to love God is a lifestyle. Verse 7 encourages Israelite parents to teach these commandments to their children “when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise” (ESV). Two specific parameters are mentioned here. There is a spatial dimension, that they are to teach these commandments wherever they go, whether in the confines of the home (“whenever you sit in your house”) or outside of the home (“whenever you walk by the way”). Second, there is a temporal dimension. They are to teach the commandments “when you lie down and when you rise.” Godly instruction is to be done from the moment they wake until they rest for sleep. Deuteronomy, therefore, also envisions godly instruction to be done all day, every day, at every location the Israelites go.

The third observation is that Israel is to love God with the totality of their person. The call to love God is to be done “with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your might” (6:5). According to Scott Redd, the three-fold spheres of the heart, soul, and might are a development from the innermost of a person’s core to the public aspects of their lives.² The word “heart” refers to the “seat of a person, the core of their inner life out of which the rest of their existence springs.” “Soul” refers to the whole person; it is often used when acts are done to “oneself” (Num 30:5; 1 Sam 18:3; Isa 53:10). The most intriguing analysis is regarding the final sphere of “might.” The Hebrew word here, *me’od*, is the common adverb “very.” Its use for “might” is rare (cf. Mark 12:30; Luke 10:27 “strength”). Redd traces a tradition that interprets this strength in wide ranging areas of life, including usages in military, family, farming contexts. Given this, he concludes that the term *me’od* can be best understood by what we mean by “worldly effect” or the

² Scott Redd, *The Wholeness Imperative: How Christ Unifies our Desires, Identity and Impact in the World* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2018), 19–21.

“consequences of a person’s life.”³ Therefore, there is movement here. The call to love is not meant to be delimited to the privacy of one’s thoughts alone in the heart. Every aspect of the individual is meant to love God—from the inner essence of a person (“heart”) to the entirety of the person (“soul”), even to the public aspects of life (“might”). This is consistent with the ever-expanding nature of the passage—from the individual to the community, from the inner sphere of the home to the public areas of society, from the deepest thoughts to their impact on the world. In all aspects of Israel’s social and community life, they are called to love the Lord and conform to his covenantal norms.

Creational Mandates of the Garden

Although the book of Deuteronomy was not available in the Garden of Eden, we see the same principles of total dedication in the mandates assigned to Adam. Whereas there was the cultural mandate that governed humanity’s relationship with their fellow creatures, so also there was a worship-mandate (i.e., cultic-mandate) that governed their direct relationship with their creator. Above all other virtues, humanity was to offer worship to their God in a holy bond of fellowship, and they undoubtedly did so. In the garden, their relationship with God was void of barriers as there was no sin to corrupt it. There is a priestly component to this aspect of the divine-human relationship best exemplified in Genesis 2:15, where Adam was called to till the garden landscape, but also to “protect” it. Such obligation was descriptive of Israel’s priests who also were to safeguard the sanctity of the holy dwelling of the tabernacle and temple (Num 1:53; 1 Sam 7:1; 2 Kings 12:9). The holy nature of such a task is evident by the fact that it was passed on to the angelic cherubim in Genesis 3:24 after humanity’s failure. That Adam was called to do the same illustrates a priestly element to his duties.

The most common commission is the well-known cultural mandate of Genesis 1:26–28. According to this mandate, Adam was to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it” (Gen 1:28 ESV). This task directly corresponds with their royal identity as image bearers of God as they were to exercise “dominion” (1:26) over all creation. They were sent to “fill the earth” by being “fruitful” and “multiplying.” The purpose of this mission was to establish a cadre of humanity that would grow into a vast community. From a heavenly perspective, what is envisioned is creation covered with the glory of God as the divine-image-bearing humanity spreads over the entirety of the earth. Of course, this community would need basic social order that defines how they are to live together, leadership of some sort (i.e., governance), even some semblance of clearly

³ Redd, *Wholeness*, 22.

defined rules and regulations on what activities are deemed permissible. They would also need homes to dwell in, which in turn would require a sophisticated civil infrastructure. In other words, the goal of the cultural mandate was the establishment of a holy civilization, a glorious city with the Creator-God as their heavenly king—a holy kingdom.

Given the presence of these two mandates, five conclusions can be drawn. First, the depiction of life in the garden was one of total consecration to the Lord. Humanity's cultural task dealt with their horizontal dominion over the entirety of creation. The cultic task was focused on a vertical relationship with the Lord as their Creator-King, who is worthy of all worship, adoration, and praise. Together, both covered every aspect of covenant life and accomplished as an expression of love to the Lord (Deut 6:4ff.).

Second, the city-construction task would have required the full utilization of humanity's God-endowed abilities, both intellectual and physical. They began as priestly gardeners to care and work the garden of God (Gen 2:15). This would have progressed beyond agricultural tasks to those more urban in nature. Construction of a city-wide project would have required the preparation of material goods subdued from creation (Gen 1:28). The designing of such work would have permitted for artistic expression—a skill that was also seen in the designing of the tabernacle (Exod 31:2–5; 36:1). Meredith G. Kline states this memorably when he says, “The cultural mandate put all the capacity of human brain and brawn to work in a challenging and rewarding world to develop the original paradise home into a universal city.”⁴

Third, and related to the previous point, human work was mirrored by the Lord's work of creation. Four Hebrew words are used to describe the divine task in Genesis 1. The first is the word *bara'* (1:1). This word is often overly theologized to mean *creation-ex-nihilo*, when it also occurs to describe human actions such as birth (Ps 102:18 [MT 18]), the clearing of previously existing grounds (Josh 17:15), and the making of signposts (Ezek 21:19 [MT 24]). A second “creation” word is the Hebrew *'asah* (1:7, 16), which is commonly used throughout the Old Testament for basic and daily activities, even human construction projects (Exod 37:24; Isa 44:17). A third is *yasar* meaning “to fashion” (2:7, 19), which describes the precision work of artisans (Isa 29:16; 44:9). The fourth and most unexpected is *banah* meaning “to build” (2:22), which is the verb used in all kinds of construction projects. The use of these verbs depicts the Lord engaged in the activities similar to those of the average Israelite. Such a depiction parallels the vocation of humanity as being an earthly expression of the divine work of creation. As humanity is given a theophoric description (image of God), so the Creator-God is given an

⁴ Meredith G. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue: Genesis Foundation for a Covenantal Worldview* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2006), 70.

anthropomorphic one, which is used in Exodus 20:11 to encourage Sabbath observance.⁵ This also gives human vocation a divine integrity which cannot (and dare not) be minimized as a lesser expression of love for God than worship.

Fourth is the primacy of the cult (i.e., worship). The creation week climaxes with the Sabbath day. According to Genesis 2:2–3, the Lord completed his work of creation on this day, and thus this was a day of rest. The Lord's rest was the explanation for human rest on the sabbath day (Exod 20:11). Hebrews 4:4–9 interprets the Sabbath not as a day of the week (temporal), but rather as a reference to a place of heavenly and consummated rest (locative). In a word, it refers to the eternal kingdom of God. The fact that Hebrews interprets the eternal kingdom as a "Sabbath-rest" suggests that this kingdom will be marked by the cessation of work. If this is correct, then this possibly might offer a correction on a false impression that has been made by many Christian leaders—that heaven is a time when there will be no pastors (thus no worship by implication) but is rather a time of perfected and glorified work. The argument is that there is no need for preachers since this is a time of eternal consummate glory for a consummated and glorified humanity. What need does an incorruptible community have for preaching and worship? Scripture does not give a clear description of the relationship of worship and vocation in the eternal kingdom; thus one cannot be dogmatic on this point. The eternal kingdom will be a time when humanity will have perfected love for God (cultic mandate), but also a perfected love for their neighbor (cultural mandate). If this Sabbath imagery is correct, then this also informs the value of human vocation as a blessed service for humanity in the present that may, or may not, continue in glory. A higher and more significant blessing than service/work is rest, where God's people can rejoice in their identity not only as servants but as sons (i.e., children) of God.

A fifth and final observation is that the cultural and cultic mandates function as two sides of a theocratic order, since both tasks were holy mandates. However, after the fall, humanity found themselves in the common grace realm of a non-holy world. The cultural and cultic tasks continue, yet they are now distinguished from each other where only the cult remains holy. The cultural task now takes on the characteristics of common grace virtues and is no longer holy. This does not diminish the importance of culture formation, but rather provides it with proper goals. Though still done with devotion and love for God, the cultural task for humanity is for the good of both the reprobate and elect alike without discrimination or prejudice. This is the foundation for vocation moving

⁵ See Christopher Watkin, *Biblical Critical Theory: How the Bible's Unfolding Story Makes Sense of Modern Life and Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2022), 96–98, where he says God invited Adam and Eve to "participate in his creative work."

forward with the exception of those times where a theocratic order intrudes within human history (e.g., the ark of Noah, the nation of Israel).⁶

The Example of Solomon

These are the programmatic principles that establish a proper Old Testament understanding of vocation in covenant living. To illustrate this vocation, we now examine two examples of Solomon the king of Israel and Daniel the Judean statesman in Babylon.

Solomon is best known for a divinely endowed wisdom that far surpassed all other sages and wisemen of his day (1 Kings 4:29–32). When he was coronated as king, he appealed to the Lord for wisdom because he seemed aware of his inability to govern Israel well (3:4–14). So impressed by the fact that Solomon did not request wealth, long life, or military victories, the Lord blessed him with this extraordinary wisdom along with all these other blessings. He immediately applied this wisdom by settling the dispute of two prostitutes over the single infant (3:16–27). This provided an opportunity to showcase his newly endowed wisdom before all of God’s people (3:28).

The application of Solomon’s wisdom was extended well beyond the development of Israel’s system of legal jurisprudence. 1 Kings 4 describes the application of the Solomonic wisdom in domestic matters within Israel. David, his father, had spent the entirety of his reign engaged in military warfare against his enemies, both foreign and domestic. 2 Samuel 2–4 describes David’s long conflict against pro-Saul forces. 2 Samuel 5 and 8 describes his war against the surrounding nations.

Solomon appears to have inherited the political stability established by his father. This stability, in turn, allowed him to focus his efforts on the growth of Israel as a people with their own distinct identity—that is, he began to develop an Israelite culture. 1 Kings 4 mentions the officials of Solomon’s royal court (4:1–6). He organized Israel into twelve districts, each with their own local administrator with one overarching governor (4:7–19). Their task was to provide for the daily food provisions of the royal community in a rotational cycle. This distribution of labor meant that no single area was overly burdened in work, the result being the steady provision of rations for the king and for all Israel so that “they ate and drank and were happy” (4:20 ESV).

Not only did Solomon apply his wisdom to establish these social programs, but he also developed Israel’s first standing military (4:26). 1 Kings 9:26 and 10:22 mentions a

⁶ See Gen 9:7, where the cultural mandate is reissued after the flood, yet in a common grace order. For a description of the covenant of Noah in Genesis 9:9 as a common grace covenant, see David VanDrunen, *Living in God’s Two Kingdoms: A Biblical Vision for Christianity and Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 78–81.

fleet of ships that were used for the importing and exporting of material goods to develop Israel's economy. 1 Kings 4:29–32 describes the growth of Israel's art and literature. Even linguistically, a new standard literary Hebrew (or Classical Biblical Hebrew) was established in the days of Solomon which was used when writing literary works. In other words, all the social factors in forming a culture began to arise during this stage and Israel began to grow as a distinct nation with their own set of cultural expressions. So significant was this growth that the great German scholar Gerhard Von Rad called this rise of Israel's identity a "Solomonic humanism."⁷ Since the biblical text in Kings makes frequent intertextual references to the Pentateuch, I prefer to call this a "Solomonic Renaissance," a retrieval of ancient Mosaic writings and the recognition of ancient covenantal promises.

A large part of this Solomonic Renaissance included the construction of significant building projects. The most noteworthy of these was the temple. The task of temple construction was explicitly stated in the covenant of David (2 Sam 7:13) and Solomon is depicted as fulfilling that cultic task. The importance of the temple is reinforced by its central location in the chiastic organization of 1 Kings 3–11:

- A 3:1–3 Marriage to Egyptian princess
- B 3:4–19 Solomon's request for wisdom
- C 3:16–28 Demonstration of wisdom (two mothers)
- D 4:1–34 Governmental organization
- E 5:1–9:14 Temple construction and dedication
- D' 9:15–28 Governmental overview
- C' 10:1–13 Demonstration of wisdom (Queen of Sheba)
- B' 10:14–29 Solomon's great wisdom and wealth
- A' 11:1–43 Marriage to foreign women

The Book of Second Chronicles has a similar chiasm that also has a central location for the temple construction:

- A 2 Chr. 1 Solomon's endowment of wisdom and wealth
- B 2 Chr. 2 Solomon's International assistance for temple construction
- C 2 Chr. 3–5:1 Construction of the temple
- D 2 Chr. 5:2–7:10 Dedication of the temple
- D' 2 Chr. 7:11–22 God's response to Solomon
- C' 2 Chr. 8:1–16 Solomon's other building projects
- B' 2 Chr. 8:17–9:21 Solomon's International relations
- A' 2 Chr. 9:22–28 Solomon's wisdom and wealth

⁷ Gerhard Von Rad, *Holy War in Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 83.

One outstanding difference between Kings and Chronicles is the fact that Kings portrays Solomon as a creator of the culture of Israel and the temple of God. Chronicles, however, depicts Solomon as a temple builder exclusively. Little is said regarding his interest in culture formation. The reason for this absence is not given. Since Chronicles (a post-exilic text) was written in the aftermath of the destruction of the temple, it is possible that Solomon's exclusive concern with the temple was to encourage the post-exilic Judeans to prioritize the reconstruction of the Solomonic temple and reestablish the vertical connection with the Lord in worship.⁸

Therefore, Solomon illustrates an Israelite king who exercises his wisdom to establish Israel as a nation (cultural task). As significant as that may be, his primary interest was in the construction of the temple (cultic task). This is affirmed by the central location of the temple construction in the organizational structure in Kings and Chronicles. In that regard, Solomon mirrors the same tasks that Adam had in the garden. Adam also used all his intellect, skill, and strength to build a glorious city for the growing population of image-bearers. This city was holy, a temple-city where the people can rejoice in the primary interest of living in consummated fellowship with their Creator-King for all eternity.

The Example of Daniel

Daniel is another example that illustrates the proper approach to vocational engagement. In comparison to Solomon, Daniel's situation differed significantly. Unlike Solomon whose career was within the boundaries of the holy-kingdom realm of Israel, Daniel's vocational career was in the non-holy land of Babylon. Unlike Solomon who was the creator of culture, Daniel lived and worked in a pre-existing culture. His entire professional career was as a servant in the court of pagan kings. He began as a court official under the reign of Nebuchadnezzar and continued until the reign of Cyrus the Great, a span of over seventy years. During that time, Daniel appeared to adapt and accept the cultural norms of his new setting. He appeared to "seek the welfare of the city" where the Lord had sent him (cf. Jer 29:7), even though this was a city (and king) who decimated his people and his city Jerusalem. In other words, Daniel's life has similarities with the contemporary situation of Christian believers who also are called to do work as

⁸ Solomon's polygamy and apostasy is also excluded in the Chronicler's account. It is possible that the Chronicler is attempting to develop an identity of the kind of Davidic son that is needed, one that is faithful, obedient, and focused with the primacy of the temple construction to restore proper worship to the Lord. Cf. Zech 6:9-12 that describes the messianic "branch" whose primary task is to build the temple of the Lord.

spiritual “sojourners and exiles” (1 Pet 2:11) in a spiritually hostile context. For that reason, the life of Daniel is instructive for us today.

There is a significant observation to note regarding Daniel: he was young, intelligent, and handsome who hailed from either a royal or noble family (Dan 1:3–4). These were the selection criteria that Nebuchadnezzar used to determine who among the Judean exiles would be trained in Babylonian cultural distinctives. There are several reasons why these people were selected. First, they are from the higher echelons of the Judean community. If the social elite were to acknowledge Babylonian supremacy, this would persuade their fellow Judeans to comply to the social norms of their captors and establish a submissive spirit to their cultural overlords. Second, they are handsome. Since these youths were expected to serve in the royal court, a way for a king to establish his superiority to visiting royal dignitaries was by showcasing the physical beauty of his court-servants. Third, they were intelligent. They needed to show they possessed the skills to do the work of statecraft, serve in an advisory and diplomatic role, and even offer strategic military counsel whenever needed. Since Daniel met these criteria, he was a logical person to go through the rigorous cultural assimilation program of Babylon (Dan 1:4).

In each stage of this re-culturalization process, Daniel embraced the new societal norms placed upon him. The first stage of his assimilation was to become a eunuch. It was a common practice in the ancient world for prisoners-of-war to be made eunuchs. The fact that Daniel has the “chief eunuch” (1:3 ESV) with oversight over him suggests that Daniel shared that similar experience.⁹ Since the Hebrew word for “eunuch” (*saris*) can also mean “official,” we cannot be dogmatic on this point. If correct, it testifies to the extent that Daniel was willing to conform to the cultural norms of his surroundings.

A second stage in Babylon’s assimilation was reeducation, to “teach them the literature and language of the Chaldeans” (1:4 ESV). The “language of the Chaldeans” was the east-semitic language of Akkadian, which was written using cuneiform signs. This is a difficult writing system for a complex language. Their “literature” was vast, ranging from basic economic texts to elevated epic poems. Omen texts particularly seemed to have fascinated Nebuchadnezzar since he was interested in “magicians and enchanters” (1:20). Daniel must have studied well as he excelled academically in all these areas, becoming a very competent philologist. This made him an entrusted scribe and sage for numerous kings throughout his career.

A third stage was the reception of a new name; Daniel was renamed “Beltshazzar” (1:6–7). A new name has two effects. One, it gave Daniel a new cultural identity. By

⁹ Cf. Isa 39:7 that warns Israelite sons will be made eunuchs in the exile.

receiving a Babylonian name, the strategy was that Daniel slowly forget his Judean origins and embrace Babylon as his home. Two, it reminded him that he was prisoner under a higher authority, specifically the Babylonian king who renamed him.

Surprisingly, Daniel was willing to conform to these cultural standards without raising any issues. He did not rebel against these changes, he did not argue or complain about them, nor did he attempt to transform Babylon. Instead, he accepted them and “prospered” (Dan 6:28), even to his own physical detriment (i.e., eunuch). However, the only time he refused to comply was when he was required to eat the royal meal of the king. For Daniel, to partake of this meal would “defile himself” before God (1:8). He wanted to live in peace with Babylon, but not at the expense of losing his vertical access with his God. For that reason, he was “resolved” not to eat these foods, even if that put him in harm’s way.

This was not the only time Daniel stood firm in opposition to his authorities. He would again revolt against a human king in Daniel 6 (Darius the Mede) when a royal edict demanded all peoples to direct their prayers to the earthly monarch, not to their gods. In Daniel 3, the three friends Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego also stood their ground in defiance to a royal decree that mandated the worshipping of a pagan idol in the image of Nebuchadnezzar. Thus, it seems that Daniel and his three friends had a *modus operandi* for life in exile: they were willing to participate in the assimilation process and the daily routines of life until their fidelity to the Lord was challenged and they were no longer permitted to “have no other gods” before the one and only God (Exod 20:3; Deut 5:7). In other words, Daniel eagerly and wholeheartedly *loved his neighbor as himself* (Lev 19:18; Matt 22:39; Mark 12:31), but not if this meant compromising his heart to *love God with all his heart, soul, and might* (Deut 6:5; Matt 22:37–38; Mark 12:30). Such priority is applicable for us, even in our day today as we engage in our vocational calls as pilgrims in unholy land.

Conclusion

What we see in the Old Testament is a call to love the Lord. This is the highest of virtues in covenant living. This is true throughout the entirety of the Holy Scriptures, both in the Old and the New. Love for God is not partitioned to narrow areas of an individual’s life, nor is limited to specific days or times of the year. Love for God is done with every fiber of our being in every area of our lives—in our acts of worship and the duties of our professions. Because we ultimately do all our works in service to the Lord, nothing short of our best efforts is expected. All our abilities, intelligence, skills, strengths are to be in service to our God. There will come a time when our vocations will be transformed. They

will either become glorified thus productive, meaningful, satisfying, devoid of any corruption by sin; or they will come to a terminus so that we may enjoy the eternal and consummated Sabbath-rest. Regardless, we are called now to work and to do so with excellence. Solomon did so, as did Daniel. By faith in the Lord, so we can as well.

The Pentateuch: I Will Be With You

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Introduction

Climbing Mount Everest is considered one of the greatest physical achievements.¹ To do so, however, one must hire a local Sherpa to guide the climber to the treacherous peak from the Nepalese side. One of the guides, Kami Rita, climbed Everest twice in just ten days during the 2024 climbing season that typically goes from April to May. This extended his record for most Everest climbs to an impressive thirty total climbs.²

While hundreds of foreigners will be celebrating their considerable accomplishment of climbing Everest on social media, at dinner parties, and even some building lucrative speaking careers as motivational speakers, these climbers would have never been successful if it were not for the guides who were with them. The source and significance of faithful Christian work comes from the God who promises to be with you always, including in your day to day work.

The faith and work movement has regularly appealed to the Pentateuch to make important observations about the nature of work being tied to the *imago dei* prior to the Fall (Genesis 1–2).³ Work, although touched by the Fall, is not a product of the Fall. This fact leads to discussions about the nature of work not only in relation to the present human condition but also the nature of redeemed work in the New Heavens and the New Earth.⁴

¹ I wish to thank Michael Allen and Damein Schitter for the invitation in this colloquium. I am also grateful to Bryan Fowler, who offered some very helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article. Finally, I am thankful for the participants of the colloquium and their feedback to my work.

² Binaj Gurubacharya, “Sherpa guide Kami Rita climbs Mount Everest for his record 30th time, his second one this month.” *AP News* (March 22, 2024): <https://apnews.com/article/everest-record-sherpa-guide-kami-rita-nepal-ad258465895a6b78c883527b5ac30a16> (Accessed Jan. 24, 2025).

³ See, for example, Timothy Keller, *Every Good Endeavor* (London: Penguin, 2014), 33–43, and Tom Nelson, *Work Matters: Connecting Sunday Worship to Monday Work* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 19–31.

⁴ See now Michael Allen, “First Principles and Last Things for a Theology of Work,” *Reformed Faith and Practice* 9 (2024), 46–54.

Another passage from the Pentateuch that has received considerable attention is the way in which the Lord speaks of men being raised up to work with metals and wood to facilitate the construction of the Tabernacle (Exodus 31). This passage serves as an example of one of the ways by which God invites fallen humanity to participate in His work of facilitating His taking up residence among the people of God in ways that extend well beyond spiritual vocations. Further, it presents construction and working with one's hands as God-ordained and God-glorifying vocations.⁵

This paper, in some sense, bridges these two prominent passages discussed in the faith and work movement. One of the central promises that God makes to His people is His presence.⁶ In perfect fellowship with God, humanity was given the gift of work among God's very good creation. Despite the Fall, sinful creatures are invited to participate in His work in communion with the Living God. The promise of presence marks an encouraging truth for the people of God but also comes with a warning. God's dwelling among His people has implications for every type of work, and points forward to the ultimate goal of human existence and endeavor.

I Will Be With You

By Exodus 3, Moses had been a shepherd for forty years. This is sometimes treated as a failure on his part as he rushed ahead of God in Exodus 2:11–22. According to this position, Moses had to be humbled before he was ready to be used by God. Although humility is essential for service to God, the New Testament presents these events in Moses's life in a very different light (Acts 7:20–53; Heb 11:23–28). Without placing blame on Moses, Stephen connects the Israelites' rejection of Moses in Exodus 2 to how Stephen's generation rejected Jesus (Acts 7). Similarly, the author of Hebrews treats the flight of Moses as an act of faith rather than one involving the fear of man (Heb 11:23–28), highlighting Moses's desire to share in the sufferings of Christ rather than enjoying the riches of Pharaoh. Still, the result was the same. After fleeing Egypt, Moses became a shepherd in the wilderness for forty years.

Considering the rejection that Moses faced the last time he sought to lead the Israelites, his response to God's call should come as no surprise. When God meets Moses in the wilderness in the burning bush, God calls him to go to Pharaoh to command him

⁵ See Jeremy Kidwell, *The Theology of Craft and the Craft of Work* (London: Routledge 2016), 32–39.

⁶ The goal of this paper is less about offering a theology of work and more about considering how our theology informs our work. See Miroslav Volf, *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008), 76–79.

to let the people of God go. Moses replies, “Who am I?” (Exod 3:11). If we were going to write God’s response to Moses, we would want God to remind Moses of his résumé. God could remind Moses that he was educated in Pharaoh’s household and was mighty in word and deed. According to Stephen, such a statement would be true (Acts 7:22). God could say to Moses that he has a lot of untapped potential. Moses just needs to dig down deep and go for it. God could have said that and, in one sense, it would have been true. But God does not say any of that; instead, God says, “I will be with you.” We can begin to approach the significance of this promise by noting the revelation of the name of Yahweh in Exodus 3:14–15.

Moses asks what he shall say if the people ask for God’s name (Exod 3:13). In Exodus 3:14–15, the name Yahweh is revealed to Moses, which will be proclaimed more fully in Exodus 33–34. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to treat the significance of this passage exhaustively, in “The Trinity, Expositions of Psalms 121, Sermon 6, and Sermon 7,” Augustine of Hippo provides an apt description of the revelation of the divine name in Exodus 3:14–15.⁷ Augustine describes how the declaration, “I am who I am,” is an attempt to articulate who God is in himself (Exod 3:14). The absolute name of God is that he is *in se*. Augustine uses numerous terms for this idea: *idipsum* (not comparable), *ego sum qui sum* (He is who He is), *est* (He is). In the absolute sense, Yahweh is the God who is beyond description. Exodus 3:15, however, includes the name given to humanity by which they are to know Him. He is Yahweh, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In sum, Exodus 3:14 deals with the absolute name of God. He is who He is. But the name of YHWH is both absolute (He is who He is) and the relational and covenantal name whereby the unknowable, ineffable God becomes known. The God who is *in se* is promising to be with Moses. As such, the proclamation of the *tetragrammaton* (YHWH) in Exodus 3:14–17 and later in Exodus 6:1–10 roots the immeasurable greatness of the divine name in the relatable and understandable terms: “The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob” (Exod 3:16; see also Exod 6:2). The God who is beyond searching out is for His people. The God who spoke the world into existence is stooping down and drawing near to Moses and His people.

This promise of presence, however, is not just for Moses or for those who are called to vocational ministry. As stated above, in Exodus 31:1–11, Bezalel is described as filled with the Spirit of God to work with precious metals, wood, and stone. Oholiab is also appointed by God as Bezalel’s assistant (Exod 31:6). Further, God states that He is the one

⁷ For an excellent theological interpretation of the tetragrammaton, see Andrea D. Saner, “*Too Much to Grasp*”: Exodus 3:13–15 and the Reality of God (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2015). This section benefits from the discussion by Saner. See, in particular, pages 226–228.

who gave men the ability to make all that was necessary for the construction of the tabernacle. The very task of taking things from the natural world and elevating them into something beautiful and shaping them for a higher purpose is clearly depicted as a gift from God. In this manner, God is offering His presence to fallen humanity to facilitate further communion with Him.

The promise of God's presence is a central promise in the rest of Scripture. The solution that is consistently given to the inadequacy of God's servants is His presence. God can give nothing greater than Himself. God can withhold nothing greater than Himself. When Jacob flees the wrath of his brother Esau and later goes to Egypt because of famine, God promises to be with him (Gen 28:15; 46:4). The Lord was with Jacob as he was a shepherd in Laban's household (Gen 31:5). When leadership shifts from Moses to Joshua, God promises Joshua that He will be with Joshua (Josh 1:5). When the Israelites are to go to war, they are promised His presence (Deut 20:1). God encourages the people with His presence when speaking of restoration after the exile (Isa 41:8–10). When Jeremiah states that he is too young and unable to speak in response to God's calling to be a prophet to the nations, God promises to be with him (Jer 1:8).

The promise is not really about success, however. It is about God being with His people on the good days and the bad. For example, the trials that the people of God will face in Isaiah 43:1–7 come with the promise of God's presence. The Psalmist can even walk through the "valley of the shadow of death" and fear no evil, "for you are with me; your rod and staff, they comfort me" (Psa 23:4 ESV). Even more poignantly for the faith and work movement, the Lord was with Joseph, as he was sold by his brothers into slavery, falsely accused and imprisoned, and finally exalted in Egypt (Genesis 39–42). Through it all, the Lord was with Joseph. Whether administering Potiphar's household, running the jail, or leading Egypt through a famine, the Lord was with Joseph.

It would be wrong to assume that God's presence is only offered for those doing ministry; God was with Jacob, the shepherd, and Joseph, the administrator, through all the ups and downs of their lives, including the joys of success and the sorrows of their trials. The greatness of this promise, which was in shadows and types in the Old Covenant, becomes realized for every believer in the incarnation of the Son of God and the outpouring of the Spirit of the risen and exalted Christ. Indeed, the Apostle Paul calls the people of God to understand and live their lives in view of the fact that they have become temples of the Living God (1 Cor 6:19). This means that every facet of our lives, including our work, is lived in the special presence of God.

The Holiness of God

The comforting nature of this central promise, however, comes with a very sobering truth. When Moses turns aside to see the bush that was burning but not consumed, God warns him not to come near but to take off his sandals, for the place where he was standing was holy (Exod 3:5). Although God draws near to sinful people, this does not negate the truth that the Lord Most High is holy. So, the promise of presence comes with a warning and a responsibility. This reality is seen very clearly at the revelation of the Ten Commandments and after the Golden Calf worship.

Israel's response to the terrifying theophany at the foot of Mount Sinai was to ask for Moses to mediate the word of God to them (Exod 19:1–20:21). Later in Deuteronomy 5 and 18, God states that the Israelites were right in their recognition of their need of a mediator. In Deuteronomy 5, God states, "Oh that they had such a mind as this always, to fear me and so keep all my commandments, that it might go well with them and with their descendants forever" (Deut 5:29 ESVUK). As such, the presence of God should not only bring comfort; it is attended with a responsibility to honor and glorify Him in every way (Deut 6:4).

But Israel failed to remember the warning of the terrible theophany. After the Golden Calf incident in Exodus 32, the Israelites receive the devastating word that God will not be with them as they enter the Promised Land (Exodus 33). God will keep His promise that He made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to give them the land, but He will send His angel.⁸ This devastating judgment is explained, as follows:

I will send an angel before you, and I will drive out the Canaanites, the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; but I will not go up among you, lest I consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people. (Exod 33:2–3 ESV)

This judgment is of such consequence that it is repeated in Exodus 33:5 and is not resolved until mediation by Moses and the revelation of the glory of God, as God proclaims the name YHWH before Moses (Exod 34:1–9).

⁸ Some commentators understand this to be in reference to the Angel of YHWH, who in other passages, such as Exodus 3, is equated with God himself. This interpretation, based largely on God's declaration that He will not go and his later statement that He will go, fails to account adequately for the contrast between the presence of the Lord and the sending of an angel in Exodus 33 or the role of mediation in the passage.

While the coming of Jesus Christ in the New Covenant brings “grace upon grace” (John 1:16–17) and freedom because of the Spirit of the Lord (2 Cor 3:17), the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit comes with a calling to glorify God.

Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body. (1 Cor 6:18–20 ESV)

This truth causes one to reframe, perhaps, the idea of God-with-us. The idea of God being with you in your work can be seen as a tacit approval and blessing of everything that you do in your day to day lives, or at least in the broad strokes. These appear to be the sins that beset the generations of Israel leading up to the exile (Amos 5; Jeremiah 7). But the concept of God’s presence in every facet of your life, including your work, provides both comfort and places a great responsibility upon the Christian, because Christ purchased us with His blood. This should transform how you treat others at work, steward your time, pursue work, and even rest (Deuteronomy 5).

Worship

Just as the comfort that God gives to His people in the face of their inadequacies causes them to look beyond themselves to the Living God, the goal and end of our vocation is not ourselves. Moses was called to bring the people out of Egypt to serve God on the mountain (Exod 3:12). Biblical redemption is never about just being set free; it entails being set free from one thing to pursue another. The Israelites were being set free from Egypt to serve the God Most High. The language used in Exod 3:12 for worship is one of the two key words used to describe the task of the man in the Garden at creation, who was called to “work and to keep” the garden (Gen 2:15). An interesting facet of this calling is that the God who created all things of nothing and all very good, chose to invite humanity to participate in ruling and subduing, in working and keeping. It is the same with respect to our vocations.

Life in communion with God is to be ordered in every respect towards honoring and glorifying Him. This is true of life in the New Covenant as well. In Christ, you have been set free from slavery to sin to serve Christ (Rom 6:18). Just as your body is not your own, for it has been redeemed by Christ, so your work does not just belong to you. Even the most mundane tasks are to be ordered toward the glory of the God who made all

things and who stooped down to be your God. As the Heidelberg Catechism Question 1 reads:

Q. What is your only comfort in life and in death?

A. That I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.

He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven; in fact, all things must work together for my salvation.

Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.

This desire to live for Christ is not just tied to attending gathered worship or bible studies. Communion with God from the factory line to the C-suite enables the simple tasks of pursuing our work to become acts of worship directed toward the God who is seated on the throne.

Conclusion

When climbing Everest, the adventurers are trusting that the Sherpa not only plans their journey from start to finish, but they are also trusting that their guide will be with them every step of the way through all the twists and turns. God does not just set His people on a journey. Whole life discipleship is carried out every step of the way in the special presence of the God who has promised to never leave nor forsake His people.

It can be easy to feel like God is with us when things are going well but feel abandoned during trials. Although God never promises ease this side of glory, He does promise to be with His people every step of the way. Living and working conscious of being in God's special presence, should lead to whole life discipleship.

Even the most mundane tasks are performed in the presence of the God who promises to be with you. God's presence is a central and often overlooked promise in the Bible. It is a central promise in that it pervades all of Scripture and relates fundamentally to the twofold knowledge of God as creator and redeemer. This promise provides comfort to the people of God that no matter where they go or what they do, the God of the

universe is with them. But the promise of presence came at a great cost. In the Garden, Adam and Eve were created for communion with the Living God. When they sinned by taking of the forbidden fruit, they attempted to hide from God. But in Genesis 3:9, the Lord God called them out of their sin, knowing full well it would cost Him His Son (Gen 3:15). It is not enough to simply add some Christianity to your work and assume that God will be with you. The promise of God's continued presence came at a great cost with the implication that you are not your own for you have been bought with a price (1 Corinthians 6).

Human Flourishing and the Book of Ruth

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Human flourishing is a significant theme in the Scriptures. The Apostle John tells us why God became man and came to earth in Jesus's own words in John 10:10, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full."¹ This is not the only nor the ultimate reason why Jesus came. The Apostle John also records Jesus's reason for coming so that humans might have life to its fullest in John 17:1–2, "Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him."

Though holding a penultimate position, human flourishing is still a significant theme in the Scriptures. The Apostle John also shows us something of what this flourishing will look like in the eschaton, "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" (Rev 21:4). In Revelation 22:1–3a, John gives another description of this eschatological flourishing drawn from the Old Testament,

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse.

The NIV rightly provides the subtitle for this section, "Eden Restored." If protology anticipates eschatology, we should go back to the beginning in our discussion of human flourishing in the book of Ruth. First, we will look at the origin of human flourishing in creation. Second, we will look at human flourishing as the focus of the book of Genesis. Third, we will see how Naomi lost this flourishing. Fourth, we will see how this flourishing was restored to Naomi. Fifth, we will briefly look at the Davidic covenant that

¹ Scripture quotations are taken from the 2011 NIV, unless indicated otherwise.

flows from the events in the book of Ruth, a covenant like the covenant of creation and the covenant with Abraham that has human flourishing at its heart.

Human Flourishing: Origin in Creation

Genesis 5:1b–2 provides a summary of the creation account in Genesis 1:1–2:3. It is significant that this summary ignores all of the details in the original creation account except the creation of human beings. Two things are said of these human beings: 1) they were created in God's image and 2) God blessed them, both taken from Genesis 1:26–28. For the purpose of this paper, our interest is in the latter. What does it mean that God "blessed" humanity?

The verb translated "blessed" is a Piel from the root בֵּרַךְ/*brk*. We are not interested in the entire semantic range of this verb but only in what it means when deity is the subject and humanity is the object, as is the case in Genesis 5 and 1, a collocation that occurs sixty-five times in the Hebrew Bible. In Genesis 1:28, this verb is followed by the verb "said." This second verb is a *waw* consecutive imperfect, functioning epexegetically or as an explanation of the previous verb.² So, we could translate the beginning of Genesis 1:28 with "God blessed them *by saying* to them...."

God's blessing is his formative, *empowering* word (often, with overtones of appointing destiny). It is not an empty pronouncement or simply an expression of wish or goodwill, nor is it a bare command, although the formula of blessing in 1:28 is couched in the imperative ("Be fruitful ... increase in number ... fill the earth ... subdue it.... Rule ..."). Rather, the blessing of God has content; it *actualizes* and *enables*.³

When God blesses, he "*actualizes and enables*." The English verb "bless" can be rather vacuous. The word "empower" has more communicative power in our culture and well

² WO §33.2.2.a. "Sometimes the situation represented by ׀ does not succeed the prior one either in time or as a logical consequence; rather it explains the former situation...." See the end of this article for a list of abbreviations.

³ NIDOTTE 1.758–759 (emphasis added). WO §34.4.c. "The imperative, like the jussive, has uses in which its ordinary force is lost. The figure of *heterosis* involves the exchange of one grammatical form for another; with the imperative, heterosis creates a promise or prediction to be fulfilled in the future, made more emphatic and vivid than would be the case were the prefix conjugation used...."

captures the sense of the Piel of בָּרַךְ/*brk* when God is the subject and people are the object.⁴ When God blessed humanity in the beginning, God empowered humanity to be fruitful, to increase in number, to fill and subdue and rule the earth. Or to put it more succinctly, to flourish.

Human Flourishing: Focus in the Book of Genesis

While it is important to distinguish a word from a concept, it is also important to note one of the hallmarks of Hebrew literary style: the repetition of words.⁵ Some would say that the focus of the book of Genesis is on the kingdom of God, but that is odd given that the word kingdom occurs only two times in the book (Gen 10:10; 20:9) and neither refers to the kingdom of God. Others would say that the focus is on covenant, which does occur twenty-seven times, but this pales in comparison to the repetition of “bless/blessing” in the book. Words from the root בָּרַךְ/*brk* occur eighty-eight times in the book, which is hard to ignore when considering the focus of Genesis.

But it is not simply the number of occurrences that is of interest. As seen above, when Moses summarized the creation account in Genesis 5:1–2, one of the two things that he said about the creation of humanity was that God “blessed” them. In addition, it can be argued that Genesis 12:1–3, the call of Abraham, is the thematic text of the book:

The LORD had said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation, and I will *bless* you; I will make your name great, and you will be a *blessing*. I will *bless* those who *bless* you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be *blessed* through you.”⁶

Words from the root בָּרַךְ/*brk* occur five times in these three thematic verses, so it is hard to miss the main point. Of course, in Genesis 15 God is going to make a covenant with Abraham, but the making of the covenant has to be read in the context of the call of

⁴ We will discuss this in greater detail in the next section, but for now, consider Genesis 24:35; 26:12; Deuteronomy 2:7; Psalm 67:6–7 [MT 67:7–8]; 128:5.

⁵ I tell my students that (metaphorically speaking) Hebrew mothers taught their children to repeat their vocabulary so that people would not miss the main point.

⁶ Emphasis added.

Abraham. One of the goals of the covenant is the blessing of the nations or human flourishing.⁷

It was noted above that when God blesses humans, he empowers them to flourish. There are numerous specific ways in which God empowers people in the book of Genesis. Still, two outnumber the others by far: God empowers to produce children, and he empowers to produce wealth. This is evident in the original creation story when God blessed humanity by saying to them, “Be fruitful and have dominion over the earth.” Here are two other illustrative texts:

I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her. (Gen 17:16)

The LORD has blessed my master abundantly, and he has become wealthy. He has given him sheep and cattle, silver and gold, male and female servants, and camels and donkeys. (Gen 24:35)

Simply put, the focus of the book of Genesis is the empowering of the line of Abraham to flourish so that eventually “all the families of the earth” will flourish.

Human Flourishing: Loss in the Book of Ruth

The Primary History,⁸ Genesis through Kings (minus the book of Ruth), provides the canonical context in which every other book in the Old Testament must be read. In the Hebrew canon, the Primary History is the foundational story in the Hebrew canon, with the book of Ruth occurring in the third and final section of the canon.⁹ The book of Ruth must be read in the context of the Primary History and the book of Genesis with its focus on human flourishing, specifically in terms of wealth and children.

⁷ If space permitted, I would likewise argue that the coming of the kingdom has as one of its goals human flourishing.

⁸ The Primary History refers to Genesis through Kings (minus the book of Ruth) as an integrated historical, literary, and theological unit. The absence of Ruth is owing to the fact that the Primary History is based on the Hebrew canon and comprises the Torah and the Former Prophets. See Bruce K Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 55–61.

⁹ See Ryan M. Reeves and Charles Hill, *Know How We Got Our Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018); Gregory R. Lanier, *A Christian's Pocket Guide to How We Got the Bible* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2018).

The book begins on an ominous note: “In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land.”¹⁰ And in just a few verses we read, “both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons...” (Ruth 1:5). So, the story of Naomi starts with a lack of flourishing. She has no grain and no sons, or no wealth and no children.

The *hope* of wealth is recorded in the very next verse, “When Naomi heard in Moab that the LORD had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them...” (1:6). The word translated “food” is לֶחֶם/*lechem*. This word means “grain,” and since bread is made out of grain, it is at times translated “bread.” And since bread was a major food, it can be translated as “food.”¹¹ As farmers, ancient Israelites had three primary crops: grain, grapes, and olives. This triad frequently occurs as “grain, new wine, and olive oil” (Deut 7:13). Typically, the Hebrew used for this triad is דָּגָן/*dagann*, תִּירוֹשׁ/*tirosh*, and, שֶׁמֶן/*shemen*, the first two being synonyms of לֶחֶם/*lechem* and יַיִן/*yayin*. The reason for the order of this triad in the literature is owing to the order of the harvest season: first the grain, then the grapes, and finally the olives. Psalm 104:14–15 uses לֶחֶם/*lechem*, יַיִן/*yayin*, and שֶׁמֶן/*shemen* to provide a beautiful summary of God’s provision for humanity:

He makes grass grow for the cattle,
and plants for people to cultivate—
bringing forth grain from the earth,
wine that gladdens human hearts,
oil to make their faces shine—
food (לֶחֶם/*lechem*) that sustains their hearts. (Author’s translation)

As the lead term, לֶחֶם/*lechem* can be used as synecdoche for the entirety of agricultural produce, as it is here in the final colon: “food (לֶחֶם/*lechem*) that sustains their hearts.” So, Naomi has the hope of the restoration of the farmer’s wealth, “grain,” and along with it, wine and oil. At this early stage, however, she has no hope of progeny:

But Naomi said, “Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me?
Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands? (Ruth 1:12)

Naomi’s story starts with the lack of flourishing.

¹⁰ The position of the book of Ruth in the Hellenized canon sets it in temporal sequence with the book of Judges, and the ending of the book of Judges portrays the line of Abraham as anything but flourishing. So, both canonical positions take away any surprise at the theme of flourishing in the book of Ruth.

¹¹ CHALOT 176.

Human Flourishing: Restoration in the Book of Ruth

Though the story is about Naomi's loss and restoration, it is titled *Ruth* because Ruth is the heroine through whom Naomi experiences restoration.¹² Naomi and Ruth return from Moab just "as the barley harvest was beginning" (Ruth 1:22b). The reference to the barley harvest was promising since it was the first of the grains to be harvested and so indicative of good things to come.

Naomi's restoration begins when Ruth requests permission to join the gleaners wherever she might find an opportunity and when Naomi grants her request (2:2–3). "As chance would have it,"¹³ Ruth ends up in the field of Boaz, a family member of Naomi's deceased husband. In the field of Boaz, Ruth experiences extraordinary favor. At mealtime, "She ate all she wanted and had some leftover" (2:14). And then Boaz instructs his field hands to pull out extra stocks from the bundles for her (2:16). The result was that she netted "about an ephah" (Ruth 2:17), somewhere between twenty-five and thirty pounds of barley. Whatever the exact number, "this was an abundant result for the day's work."¹⁴ When Ruth brought Naomi the grain plus what Ruth had left over from mealtime, Naomi was amazed and grateful. The firstfruits of the grain that Naomi had lost in the famine have now been restored.

We will jump from the restoration of grain, over the romance and intrigue of Ruth's relationship with Boaz, to Ruth 4:13, "So Boaz *took* Ruth and she *became* his wife. When he *made love* to her, the LORD *enabled* her to conceive, and she *gave birth* to a son" (emphasis added). The author picks up the pace to lightning speed covering over nine months in one brief verse, and with five *waw*-consecutive verbs¹⁵ he gets to the point: "she gave birth to a son."

¹² And in this way Ruth serves as a type of Christ.

¹³ Woodenly, the Hebrew clause could be translated as "her happening happened." The King James Version renders this phrase with, "and her hap was to light on" with "hap" meaning, something that happens unexpectedly or observable cause: "chance or fortune" (the second definition in Merriam-Webster). Of course, as in the book of Esther so in the book of Ruth, nothing happens by chance but is all under divine orchestration. This clause functions somewhat like the Hebrew word *hinneh*, which is used to introduce a clause containing a surprise.

¹⁴ Jan de Waard and Eugene Nida, *A Translator's Handbook on the Book of Ruth*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: United Bible Societies 1991), 38.

¹⁵ BHRG §21.2.1.1, "*Wayyiqtol* appears predominantly in narration ... where it introduces principal events of the narrative story (foreground of the narration). The *wayyiqtol* or *waw*-consecutive imperfect is thus the backbone of Hebrew narrative.

After the heroine has given birth to the son, she is not mentioned again in the story because the story is Naomi's as is clear from the fact that the son is Naomi's. "The women living there said, "Naomi has a son!" (4:17). They had previously said to Naomi,

Praise be to the LORD, who this day has not left you without a guardian-redeemer. May he become famous throughout Israel! He will renew your life and sustain you in your old age. (Ruth 4:14–15)

The "guardian-redeemer" refers not to Boaz but to the newborn son whose name was Obed (4:17) meaning "one who serves."¹⁶ Of Obed it is said, "He will renew your life and sustain you in your old age (4:15). The verb translated "sustain" is used frequently enough with the sense of "to provide food," as in 1 Kings 17:4 where God commands ravens "to supply you (Elijah) with food there." Thus, in Obed, Naomi's restoration of both progeny and grain is complete. Through Ruth and Boaz and Obed, Naomi will once again flourish.

The genealogy at the end of the book picks up on the need for a king from the end of the book of Judges—a king who will empower people to flourish—and pushes the reader forward to the coming of David, who is himself a pointer to the one who will come so that people might flourish (John 10:10). So, we would do well to consider briefly human flourishing and the heart of the covenant with David.

Human Flourishing: Extended in The Covenant with David

I wish to focus on the second half of 2 Samuel 7:19, a half-verse which is challenging as indicated by the wide variety of translations.

- Wooden: "And this is the torah of the man, Lord GOD."
- KJV: "And is this the manner of man, O Lord GOD?"
- NASB: "And this is the custom of man, O Lord GOD."
- NIV84: "Is this your usual way of dealing with man, O Sovereign LORD?"
- NLT: "Do you deal with everyone this way, O Sovereign LORD?"
- NRSV: "May this be instruction for the people, O Lord GOD!"
- ESV: "And this is instruction for mankind, O Lord GOD!"
- TNK: "May that be the law for the people, O Lord God!"
- NIV: "and this decree, Sovereign LORD, is for a mere human!"

¹⁶ Hebrew עֹבֵד/*obed* is a Qal participle of the verb עָבַד, meaning "serve."

Historical context is provided in 2 Samuel 7:1–11a. The Lord had given David rest from all of his enemies, and since David was living in a luxurious palace (בַּיִת/*bayit*), he thought it only fitting that he should build a luxurious temple (בַּיִת/*bayit*) for the Lord. The Lord countered this proposal, saying he would build a dynasty (בַּיִת/*bayit*) for David.

The promise of this covenant indicates that it had both unconditional and conditional elements (2 Sam 7:11b–17). The continuance in perpetuity of the dynasty was unconditionally guaranteed in 2 Sam 7:11b–13 and 2 Sam 7:16. Sandwiched in between is a statement that conditions full participation by given descendants of David on obedience to the stipulations (2 Sam 7:14–15).

2 Samuel 7:18–29 records David’s response to the promise of the covenant. Verse 19b draws out a significant implication of this covenant with these words:

וְזֹאת תּוֹרַת הָאָדָם אֲדֹנָי יְהוֹה
wəzō ’t tôrat hā ’ādām ’ādōnāy yhw
 “And this is the torah of the man, Lord GOD.”

My analysis follows that of Walter Kaiser in his *Toward an Old Testament Theology*.¹⁷

While it is possible that this clause is a question, the absence of the interrogative particle at the beginning of the clause makes this dubious and puts the burden of proof on anyone who would argue otherwise. The word “this” in the second half of the verse has the same antecedent as “this” in the first half of the verse, the covenant just established with David and his dynasty in the previous verses. But what is meant by “torah of the man”?

Here תּוֹרָה/*torah* has the sense of “law,” its most frequent sense.¹⁸ The covenant with David is a law, a divinely constituted ordinance. And “the man” has the generic and collective sense of אָדָם/*’adam*, that is, humanity. But what is the meaning of “of”? In Hebrew grammar, one use of the construct relationship is for “Entity–interested (favored/injured) party,”¹⁹ what Waltke and O’Connor refer to as the genitive of advantage,²⁰ which is equivalent to the dative of interest or advantage in Greek grammar.

¹⁷ Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1978), 152–55.

¹⁸ The NIV translates תּוֹרָה/*tôrâ* with “law” 171 times out of its 219 occurrences, while the ESV translates with “law” 199 times.

¹⁹ BHRG §25.4.6.4.

²⁰ WO §9.5.2.e.

The sense is that the covenant made with David is for the benefit of not just David, nor his descendants, but all of humanity. Kaiser refers to this as “a charter for humanity.”

Of interest is Psalm 66:5–6, which says, “Come and see what God has done ... He turned the sea into dry land” For whose benefit did God part the Red Sea? The average Christian who knows something about the Old Testament would say, “for Israel’s benefit.” But the text says that the parting of the waters was among “his awesome deeds for mankind!” (66:5) As God brought Israel through the waters of the Red Sea and into the promised land for the benefit of humanity, so he established a covenant with David as “a charter for humanity.” The covenant with David was a divinely constituted ordinance for the benefit of mankind.

I am not alone in following the argumentation of Kaiser on this half-verse. Consider also comments by Waltke and Dumbrell,

Walt Kaiser plausibly interprets *tôrat hā’ādām* (2 Sam. 7:19) in David’s response to the covenant by “a charter for humanity” that impacts all nations.²¹

For while the links are tenuous and need to be pursued more vigorously than is possible in this brief survey, the Davidic covenant as the “charter of humanity” seems to prefigure in political terms the establishment of divine government through a human intermediary, so that the full intentions of the divine purpose for the race, expounded in Gen. 1–2, might be achieved.²²

In the beginning, God intended humanity to flourish. And in the covenant made with David, God takes one more step to see the realization of this flourishing.

Conclusion

It is in the context of the theme of human flourishing that human labor finds meaning. This is not to say that human flourishing is the only context for the locus of meaning in human labor but that it is one key context.

In the beginning, “The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it” (Gen 2:15).²³ “Work is a gift of God, not a punishment for sin. Even before

²¹ Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, 692.

²² William J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation: An Old Testament Covenant Theology*, rev. ed. (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2013), 152.

²³ The text also says “to take care of it” in the NIV and “keep it” in the ESV, but these translations miss the point. While these translations lend themselves to an environmentalist reading, the Hebrew verb

the fall humanity has duties to perform.”²⁴ God created humanity to flourish, and from the beginning, work has been a means to that end. In the book of Ruth, we see the work of Boaz, his foreman, his field-hands, and Ruth. The result of this work is not only the flourishing of the workers but also the flourishing of Naomi. And, of course, the flourishing of Naomi results in the birth of David and eventually in the birth of Jesus, who came that humanity might flourish (John 10:10).

Meaning is found in work when we see work as God’s ordained means for our flourishing and for the flourishing of others through us. The Apostle Paul gets at this in another way in 1 Timothy 6:17–18 when he says,

Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share.

God empowers people to flourish²⁵ so that they can enjoy the fruits of their labor and facilitate the flourishing of those who are around them.

(שָׁמַר/*shamar*) in this context refers to the priestly responsibility to maintain the sanctity of the Garden-Sanctuary. See for example, the ESV of Numbers 1:53, “But the Levites shall camp around the tabernacle of the testimony, so that there may be no wrath on the congregation of the people of Israel. And the Levites shall *keep guard over* the tabernacle of the testimony” (emphasis added). In keeping with this sense of the verb, after God expelled Adam, the first priest, from the garden, God “placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way *to guard* the way to the tree of life” (Genesis 3:14, ESV, emphasis added). See Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 87, “**work it and take care of it**... Elsewhere in the Pentateuch this expression describes activity only of priests. The latter term entails guarding the garden against Satan’s encroachment (see 3:1–5). As priest and guardians of the garden Adam and Eve should have driven out the serpent; instead it drives them out” (emphasis added).

²⁴ Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, 87.

²⁵ Similarly, Deuteronomy 8:18 says, “But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your ancestors, as it is today.”

List of Abbreviations

- BHRG* Merwe, Christo H. J. van der, J. A. Naudé, and J. H. Kroeze. *A Biblical Hebrew Reference Grammar: Second Edition*. London: T&T Clark, 2017.
- CHALOT* Holladay, William L. *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988.
- NIDOTTE* VanGemeren, Willem, ed. *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*. 5 vols. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997.
- WO* Waltke, Bruce K., and M. O'Connor. *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990.

The Prophetic Literature for Vocational Discipleship

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“From the day that your fathers came out of the land of Egypt to this day, I have persistently sent all my servants the prophets to them, day after day.”¹
(Jer 7:25)

Vocation Proper in the Prophets

Perhaps no Old Testament genre includes as many explicit accounts of vocation or literal callings as the prophets. Not surprisingly, however, the issue of calling in the prophetic books is concerned with the event of the divine call of the prophet. In the case of this particular calling, many elements are unique to the prophet’s experience, whereas some elements can be carefully applied to the broader category of vocation in general. For instance, most prophets have an explicit call narrative in which they meet God directly, either through unearthly theophany or through a vision of the heavenly courtroom (prophetesses are at work in the Old Testament, but explicit call narratives are rare). According to the prophet Jeremiah, this calling from the divine assembly (Hebrew *sod*, Jer 23:18, 22; Amos 3:7; cf. Job 15:8; Psa 25:14; 89:8) is a key credential for the true prophet. False prophets speak but not from divine commissioning (Jer 14:14).

Some elements of the prophetic call, however, may have a broader application for other vocations. For instance, in Jeremiah 1, the prophet is assured that his young age does not disqualify him from the work of a prophet. Here, the Lord reveals that the prophet had been formed since he was in his mother’s womb for this particular vocation. Generally speaking, this is understood as a kind of special providence for the prophet; it would not be inappropriate to recognize that the Lord is providentially at work in all of humanity, forming them for callings that he will put on their lives. Such an idea is

¹ Unless otherwise specified, biblical quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

founded both on the sovereignty and the eternality of God. To be sure, as the Apostle Paul makes clear, God has known and loves all Christians from before the foundations of the earth.

Vocational discipleship, therefore, can be founded upon the character of God as expressed in the prophets, namely that he is all-powerful, eternal, and, as a result, unchanging. Human vocation must be found within that system of God's divine economy. This is not a dualistic universe with forces of evil equally matching the forces of good, nor is it a polytheistic universe in which divine forces are constantly in conflict, and stability is nothing more than momentary peace. This is a world in which every decision is unto the Lord (Prov 16:33).

Related to the importance of the divine assembly in the calling of the prophet is the importance of realizing that personal experience may corroborate a true calling, but should not be understood as the grounds of the calling. In the story of Micaiah, the prophet, a deceiving spirit is sent out of the divine assembly to put a message of deception in the mouths of the false prophets. In the account, the spirit is commissioned by the Lord himself for the purpose of leading the wicked king Ahab astray in order to expedite his judgment. What is remarkable in this story is the fact that the false prophets indeed received a spiritual origin for their message. We need not doubt their sincerity or call them charlatans. They were visited by a spirit. The lesson from this account is, among other things, that spiritual experience is not an indicator of true calling. As a matter of fact, strong personal experience or perceived spiritual insight must be corroborated by the teaching of Scripture and the testimony of the community. It is easy for us to be deceived and drawn into a false sense of calling when we do not allow our personal experience and judgment to be influenced by outside authorities. As Jeremiah reminds us, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick" (Jer 17:9).

Lastly, we should understand that even if a vocation appears monolithic it may be varied in actual practice. The prophets themselves understood their ministries in different ways and with different titles. It is instructive to consider the many ways in which the prophet is described in the Old Testament. These are just a few of the titles that are used to describe the prophetic call:²

1. *nabi'* perhaps "one who is called" or "one who invokes" (< Akkadian *nabû* "to name, invoke") (2 Kings 9:1; 2 Chron 12:5; Jer 1:5)

² A helpful discussion of prophetic titles can be found in Edward J. Young, *My Servants the Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 56–75. The list in this essay goes beyond but is influenced by his discussion.

2. *chozeh* “seer of visions” and “visionary” (2 Sam 24:11; 1 Chron 21:9); pejorative use (Amos 7:12); in relation to pagan divination (Micah 3:7).
3. *ro’eh* “seer” (premonarchical term, 1 Sam 9:9; but used interchangeably with the other “seeing” title *chozeh* (Isa 30:9–11))
4. *’ish ha’elohim* “man of God” (emphasizes special relationship between God and prophet); Moses (Deut 33:1; Targum Onqelos *nabi’aya’ d-’adonay*; Josh 14:6; Psa 90:1); Samuel (1 Sam 9:6); Shemaiah (1 Kings 12:22); Anonymous; against Jeroboam for the high places (fulfilled 2 Kings 23:15–16); Elisha (2 Kings 8:2–11); David (Neh 12:24: a title of honor in a list); but also an angel (Judg 13:6)
5. *mal’ak ’adonay* “messenger of the LORD” (also translated as “angel of the LORD” when the referent is angelic); Haggai (Hag 1:13); Isaiah (“his messenger” Isa 44:26); prophets in general (“his messengers” 2 Chron 36:15); priests in general (“messengers of the LORD of Hosts” Mal 2:7)
6. *shomer* “guard” (Isa 21:11)
7. *tsofeh* “watcher” (Hos 9:8; Ezek 3:17; 33:2)
8. *’eved ’adonay* “servant of the LORD” Moses (Deut 34:5; Josh 1:1); Joshua, son of Nun (Josh 24:29; Judg 2:8); David (Psa 18:1; 36:1); cf. “My Servant” (Isa 42:1) “Suffering Servant”³

In the same way, we should understand that callings that appear to be simple and uniform may, in fact, be of a variety of different responsibilities and “flavors.” There are a variety of different ways that one might be gifted and experienced in a particular vocation. As a result, we must be careful about oversimplifying vocational profiles. There’s not one kind of pastor, nor is there one kind of private equity manager or business consultant. Rather, the Lord uses the variety of human giftings to serve in the variety of contexts in which any calling might occur.

On a related point, callings may develop and shift over time. Multiple prophets receive multiple callings from the Lord, callings that depend on the context in which they are ministering, historical events that occur during their lifetimes, and the changing profile of the audience (two prophets with changing calls, Isaiah 6 and 40; Ezekiel 3 and

³ N.B. “my/his servants the prophets” (2 Kings 21:10; 24:2; Jer 25:4; 26:5; Amos 3:7) is used collectively and anonymously in reference to prophetic testimony.

33). A prophet of judgment can be re-commissioned as a prophet of deliverance. We can assume that the same can occur in other sorts of vocations; callings can adjust or outright change throughout a person's life. For instance, a vocation that requires physical exertion and performance is a clear example of the changing nature of vocation: the athlete must inevitably face the decision to transition to coach, manager, or commentator. The tactical operator can become a trainer or strategic leader. The innovator can become the educator. The creative can become the preserver of creativity.⁴

Vocational Discipleship in the Prophets

Vocational discipleship is concerned with the spiritual framework and practices that help the Christian pursue a vocation in a way that honors, proclaims, and ultimately worships the God who has called him. As such, vocational discipleship is about more than merely developing skills to perform in the workplace. Tod Bolsinger writes,

Christians who provide leadership to businesses need just as much spiritual and biblical understanding of the priorities of the kingdom of God as they do the economics of market forces. Christians offering leadership in the marketplace, higher education, nonprofits or other sectors have to keep growing in our faith as much as we need to grow professionally.⁵

This essay assumes that vocational discipleship has to do with the implications of an individual's spiritual formation for their vocation, and so it has much to do with the priorities of the kingdom of God. What does faith have to do with our work, and how do we think and act deeply as followers of Christ who are called to a particular activity in life? The following are some contributions to this discussion drawn from the prophetic corpus of the Old Testament Scriptures.

Wholehearted Vocation. The use of the "whole heart" language in the prophets is a direct reference to the passage in the Torah known as the *shema* or Deuteronomy 6:4–9. This passage from the Mosaic code forms a load-bearing wall of biblical faith and ethics. Christ and his interlocutors agree that it is the "greatest commandment" (Matt 22:36–37;

⁴ Arthur C. Brooks shows how this occurs in vocations that depend on intellectual abilities as well. He describes the transition from flexible thinking in youth to static thinking in older age. See *From Strength to Strength: Finding Success, Happiness, and Purpose in the Second Half of Life* (New York: Portfolio, 2022).

⁵ Tod Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncarted Territory* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2022), 21.

cf. Mark 12:30) and the beating heart of the Mosaic covenant. The prophets affirm the call to “whole heart” faithfulness and call their audience to do the same (Isa 38:3; Jer 3:10; Jer 24:7). It is also the key feature of the biblical notion of calling that all of our outward energies (“strength,” but really something akin to “capital” or “estate”), whether ethical or vocational should spring from a heartfelt, sincere love of God. That means that every calling can be and ought to be shaped by the doxological intention of the individual. Even the most menial tasks can be performed with a desire for excellence, ethical diligence, and a self-giving spirit. In other words, vocation springs from the heart, and godly vocational discipleship resists hypocrisy and cynical self-aggrandizement.⁶

Just as the second commandment follows from the first, so does the prophet’s interest in how members of society care for one another (Lev 19:18; Matt 22:39; Mark 12:31). To have a heartfelt sense of vocation, one is required to treat others with dignity and desire for mutual benefit. Vocational discipleship ought to encourage rather than discourage others who are pursuing different vocational ends, which means looking for ways to build up others in the community, even those who have different callings or have nothing to offer as part of a transaction (Isa 1:17; Mic 6:8; cf. deceitful scales [corruption in a transaction], Hos 12:8; Amos 8:5; Mic 6:11; [just scales in restoration] Ezek 45:10; cf. the trifecta of disenfranchisement [“orphan, widow, and sojourner”], Isa 1:17, 23; 9:17; 102; Jer 5:28; 7:6; 22:3; 49:11; Ezek 22:7; Zech 7:10; Mal 3:5).

According to the prophets, vocational discipleship should lead to a growing sense of one’s relationship with God and the community. These two relational spheres are indispensable to the mature pursuit of faithful vocation.

Adaptive Leadership. Not only is it possible for prophets to receive multiple callings over the course of their life, but they must also recognize the importance of adapting to the context in which they are ministering. In his seminal introduction to the prophets, Abraham Heschel writes this about the prophet Jeremiah, but the point is relevant for all prophets,

However, it would be more significant to say that Jeremiah lived in an age of wrath. His contemporaries had no understanding of the portent of their times, of the way in which God was present at the time. They did not care for time. But the prophet has the responsibility for the moment, and openness to what the moment

⁶ See the epilogue on vocational discipleship in Tim Keller, *Every Good Endeavor* (New York: Dutton, 2012), in which he connects vocational discipleship in the church to faithful worship.

reveals. He is a person who knows what time is. To Jeremiah his time was an emergency, one instant away from a cataclysmic event.⁷

To further the example, a comparison of Jeremiah and Ezekiel is instructive. They are two prophets operating at roughly the same time with similar subject matter. They are, however, working with very different communities. Jeremiah is a prophet in the city of Jerusalem, ministering to those who have not yet been taken into exile (with the important exception of his letter to the refugees in Jeremiah 29). Ezekiel operates during the same time but in an entirely different community of refugees in the Chebar Canal region of Babylon.

Both prophets have the same general message: that Jerusalem is being judged for her syncretism and injustice, and that the refugees represent the righteous remnant who are given a chance to repent and bring about the restoration of Israel. Jeremiah's message is contextualized for a community experiencing rapid spiritual decline, and his primary message is one of judgment and calls to repentance. Ezekiel's message includes the same judgment oracles, but it also includes a message of hope for those in exile, one that encourages them to lay hold of the opportunity that is theirs as refugees. In Ezekiel 11:14–25, the prophet reports the taunts of the Jerusalemites against those in exile and fortifies the exiles against their accusations. The different tone of each prophet is brought to the fore because of their similar message.⁸

Personality Matters (or *Organic Inspiration*⁹). Related to the topic of adaptive understandings of vocation is the idea of organic inspiration. While the prophets all generally articulate the same theological outlook for the covenant community, their

⁷ Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007; repr. New York: HarperCollins, 1962), 1.106

⁸ On the contextualization inherent in prophetic communication: "Prophecy as oral communication is raw, iconoclastic, immediate, and exacting. It seeks to bring about fundamental changes in social arrangements, often before the collapse of long-standing and cherished structures—political, religious, economic, and symbolic. Prophecy as written communication attends to survivors. It takes shape during and after the frightful events; all the while it engages in artful reinterpretation and reenactment." Louis Stulman and Hyundai Chul Paul Kim, *You Are My People: An Introduction to Prophetic Literature* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2010), 10.

⁹ "Just as every human thought and action is the fruit of the action of God in whom we live and have our being, and is at the same time the fruit of the activity of human beings, so also Scripture is totally the product of the Spirit of God, who speaks through the prophets and apostles, and at the same time totally the product of the activity of the authors. 'Everything is divine and everything is human.'" Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1: *Prolegomena* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003), 434–435.

personal quirks and idiosyncrasies, including hopes, fears, and rhetorical preferences, form the way in which they perform their vocational responsibilities.¹⁰ Every vocation, including prophecy, is one that must be fed through the prism of each individual's personal autobiography. People pursuing the same vocation may come at it with very different outlooks, skills, and gifts. The function of Christian vocational discipleship is to help a person understand who they are and how they bring unique contributions to their vocation.

Of course, organic inspiration has implications for the multiple diagnostic tools that are available to people when considering a vocation. Whether you are anticipating a future vocation or in the process of living out a vocation, there are a myriad of personality assessment tools at your disposal. Many of them can be powerful aids in revealing a person's interests, skillsets, and general tendencies, but they are best applied as guides for how one might pursue a vocation. In other words, we ought to avoid reductionistic views of vocation that do not allow for organic differences between individuals. The fact that there are many different kinds of teachers, doctors, business leaders, and government officials should be recognized as a feature, not a glitch, in the system. Christian vocational discipleship seeks to direct each individual as they pursue their vocation in their own particularized way.

Multiple Vocations. Throughout the Old Testament, it becomes clear that individuals can have multiple vocations and, as a result, need to recognize the different responsibilities appropriate to each of those vocations. Similarly, the influence of one vocation over another is appropriate and adds to the unique features of the calling. For instance, the judge Deborah is also described as a prophetess (Judg 4:4). Both kings Saul and David are said to prophesy (1 Sam 10:12–13). Jeremiah and Ezekiel both come from priestly families and are prophets (Jer 1:1; Ezek 1:3). It is fascinating that Ezekiel is most likely called to ministry at age thirty, and his last vision occurred when he was fifty. These dates are also the appropriate ages for a levitical priest (Num 4:3; though also Num 8:23–25).

Vocations can happen coincidentally, and they can influence each other. We should not be surprised, therefore, to see that many of David's prophecies recorded in the Psalter are interested in the enthronement of the Messianic king and the future hope for the kingdom of Israel. Likewise, Jeremiah and Ezekiel are particularly interested in the abuses of the temple and the reforms needed so that Israel may be restored.

¹⁰ James D. Nogalski, *Interpreting Prophetic Literature: Historical and Exegetical Tools for Reading the Prophets* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), 55–56.

It is not uncommon for individuals to have multiple vocations that operate both independently of each other and also influence each other. The pastor is also a statesman; the teacher is also a volunteer fireman. If we open the aperture of our study to other vocations, such as parenthood and community leadership, the picture becomes crowded. If we think about it, most individuals wear different vocational “hats,” and proper vocational discipleship takes this into consideration.

The Case of Daniel

It is, of course, difficult to talk about the issue of vocation without considering the case of Daniel and the other Jewish youths taken into captivity in the first deportation of Jerusalem in 605 B.C. Their example is commonly used in studies that focus on vocational discipleship on a theology of work, but in the context of this essay, the example is complicated by the fact that Daniel is not traditionally thought of as one of the canonical Prophets in many of the ancient canonical orders of the Old Testament text but rather as one of the anthologies of miscellaneous works sometimes referred to as the Writings. The Book of Daniel does appear to be a late addition to the Old Testament canon, which is not surprising in light of its subject matter and the dating of the events it describes. This is compounded by its unique commitment to the ancient genre known as Apocalypse. Unlike other prophets, the visions of the future in the book are remarkably detailed, which raises questions about the nature of the prophecy found therein. Because of these differences, Daniel is not often included in the corpus of prophets, but given that this essay is intended for an audience that receives the Christian biblical canon, it is appropriate to address it here.

Daniel and the Jewish youths offer relevant examples of vocational discipleship, particularly in the way that they pursue callings that are not, by definition, ministerial. Each case presents the reader with a faithful Israelite who is serving in the Babylonian court, about the closest thing that we can find in the biblical text to a secular environment. As a result, the way that the narrator portrays, and at points praises, Daniel and his friends in these stories is instructive for us.

The following are a few additional principles that can be drawn from this intriguing book:

Sometimes Antithesis Is Required. The courtly tales found in Daniel 1–6 offer us a glimpse into the life of exiled youth in the Babylonian and later Persian courts. Each chapter offers a different episode that sheds light on the realities of life as a faithful exile. Three of the accounts (Daniel 1, 3, and 6) give vivid examples in which the main

character(s) take a principled stand in the face of imperial edict. In each case, their antithetical stance towards the governing power results in a positive outcome in which they attain a higher position than they would have received before. These episodes include the following: the case involving the king's food, the case of the fiery furnace, and the case of the lion's den.¹¹

Faithful Presence in Secular Spaces. James Hunter writes, "Christian faith had been enormously influential in the culture precisely because it has had a principal if not hegemonic role in the culture-producing institutions of society."¹² Much of the success enjoyed by Daniel and his three friends springs directly out of situations in which they are present and at work in the king's court. They are faithful to God by being actively involved in the imperial statecraft of the Babylonian and later Persian regimes. Their mere presence provides them with incredible opportunities to serve the Lord in their work for the betterment of the people of God as well as for all the citizens of the empires they serve. As a result of their presence, Nebuchadnezzar is confronted with the truth about the Lord and responds with worship; the city's ruler, Belshazzar, is faced with the truth about the Lord's plans for Babylon (literally, "the writing on the wall"), and the wicked counselors are thrown into the den of lions. The focus here is not on the prophetic messages of Daniel and his friends but rather on the presence of these faithful Israelites and their influence in the great regimes of the world.

Vocation and Divine Sovereignty. The theme of total divine sovereignty is present throughout the whole prophetic corpus, but it receives a special focus in the book of Daniel. No matter how precarious or dire the situation seems for Daniel and his Jewish friends, the Lord is present and active in all of them, moving them irrevocably towards his purposes. From the relatively local events of worshiping the king's image or praying to a God that the king does not recognize to the global events such as the movement and fall of empires, the divine king directs the steps of the book's characters. This is an important context for any conversation about vocational discipleship. No matter how secular the work or desperate the situation, the steady divine hand is always on the tiller of human history. There's no place in which one might say God is not present or God is not in sovereign control. As a result, the Christian can work as "unto the Lord" (Col 3:23–24).

¹¹ These also provide an example of adaptivity. While antithesis is necessary in the case of the episode concerning the king's diet early in the captivity, there comes a time when the avoidance of such food is no longer required (Dan 10:3).

¹² James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, & Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 84.

Conclusion

There is much more to be investigated regarding vocational discipleship in the prophetic corpus. I have attempted to look at several themes that arise both explicitly and implicitly in the prophets' description of their own vocation as well as the way they admonish the community to whom they have been sent. The desire here is not to flatten all vocations or miss the unique features of the office of the prophet, but rather to recognize that the biblical text does place value on a certain framework concerning vocation and how to pursue it with an eye for the kingdom of God in Christ.

Faith and Work in the Wisdom Literature

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Introduction

The modern faith and work movement's use of the Old Testament has been understandably and even appropriately focused mainly on Genesis, particularly on work's status as a creation mandate giving it ongoing importance in the Christian life. Once passing Genesis 3, however, the faith and work literature skips through the Old Testament, possibly landing on Joseph, Daniel, or Nehemiah, but leaving large areas of the Bible completely untouched.

When the faith and work movement does delve into the wisdom literature, it is highly slanted towards a Deuteronomistic¹ perspective, particularly the book of Proverbs, tending to cite the Bible in ways that forget the broader wisdom literature and its covenantal context. Interpreters often read Proverbs as something of a business handbook, a list of principles by which to organize and run a successful, profit-making enterprise. Seemingly, Proverbs becomes God's "How to succeed at business" book, and if the man or woman in the workplace follows its dictums, then success should follow.

Nothing is, of course, wrong with such a Deuteronomistic perspective, so long as it is not extended beyond what the whole counsel of God will support. Deuteronomy and Proverbs are both part of God's inspired, written revelation. However, just as the rest of the Bible counters an overreading of that Deuteronomistic literature, so it must be when approaching the questions of faith and work. The Bible is rich and varied, and the worlds of work and vocation are likewise rich and varied. Wisdom literature, therefore, to not be misused by the faith and work community, needs to be read both cautiously and covenantally.

¹ "Deuteronomistic" means the book of Deuteronomy and others, such as 1–2 Kings, heavily influenced by its theological perspective. In the wisdom literature corpus, this is particularly the book of Proverbs.

Wisdom Literature in Faith and Work Publications

References to wisdom literature² in the faith and work literature are heavily tilted towards the book of Proverbs. While it is difficult to provide statistical data on the question, I worked through the books in the library of the *Institute for Faith, Work, and Economics* that were particularly focused on faith and work.³ A somewhat distressingly small number had either Scripture indices proper or had Scriptures listed in their general index, so this is merely a small set of anecdotal data.⁴ In that set, 77% of Scripture references to the wisdom literature were references to Proverbs, 17% to Ecclesiastes, and 5% to Job. Even then, many references to Ecclesiastes were simply to note that Qohelet, the preacher, encourages taking satisfaction in work. While this is obviously no comprehensive survey, those who read broadly in the faith and work literature will likely agree that it is probably representative.

Further, faith and work authors tend to use Proverbs as a handbook on how to do work. A few examples taken without attribution, often in multiple works:

- Prov. 3:9–10 seemingly guarantees success if putting the Lord first: “Honor the LORD with your wealth and with the firstfruits of all your produce; then your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will be bursting with wine.”⁵
- Prov. 10:4 and 12:14 encourage that hard work will be rewarded: “A slack hand causes poverty, but the hand of the diligent makes rich.” “From the fruit of his mouth a man is satisfied with good, and the work of a man’s hand comes back to him.”
- Prov. 16:3 encourages an approach to the marketplace that focuses on trust in the Lord: “Commit your work to the LORD, and your plans will be established.”

² The “wisdom literature” traditionally includes Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes as books. To that could be added “wisdom psalms,” typically including Psalms 1, 14, 37, 73, 91, 112, 119, and 128, though the genre identification of individual psalms can be and often is debated.

³ As opposed to much of the collection, which focused more academically on economic history or theory, therefore tending not to be related as much to the intersection of faith and work, nor would such volumes appeal to the majority of the modern faith and work readers. Also note that this library access was before the *Institute for Faith, Work, and Economics* was merged into the *Institute for Faith & Culture* and then closed.

⁴ n=18, in fact.

⁵ Biblical references are given in the ESV translation unless otherwise noted.

- Prov. 16:11 encourages honesty at work: “A just balance and scales are the LORD’S; all the weights in the bag are his work.”
- Prov. 22:29 expects reward and glory for the person who works well: “Do you see a man skillful in his work? He will stand before kings; he will not stand before obscure men.”

Examples such as these abound in the faith and work literature, with authors rightly seeing that Proverbs applies to the workplace. Hannah Stolze, for instance, provides a careful reading of the texts to develop an approach she terms “wisdom-based business.”⁶ Lawrence Reed mines Proverbs for the character traits necessary for poverty alleviation.⁷ Darrow Miller uses Proverbs to discuss the value of saving wisely.⁸ Wayne Grudem and Barry Asmus use Proverbs to analyze the causes of global poverty.⁹ Russell Gehrlein uses Proverbs most prominently as an antidote to laziness.¹⁰ Philip Clements et al. use Proverbs as a set of guides for business ethics.¹¹

Common to all is an approach that treats Proverbs somewhat like an instruction manual. Representative might be the Theology of Work Project: “Proverbs is a book of sayings, advice, instructions, warnings, and examples to help guide you on the path you have chosen, an instruction manual for life and work.”¹²

Further, Proverbs has much to say about wealth, which is largely the product of work, particularly in biblical times the work of agriculture and animal husbandry. A survey of Proverbs’ teaching on wealth, then, is practically equivalent to a survey of its

⁶ Hannah Stolze, *Wisdom-Based Business: Applying Biblical Principles and Evidence-Based Research for a Purposeful and Profitable Business* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2021).

⁷ Lawrence Reed, “A Poverty Program that Worked,” in *For the Least of These*, ed. Anne Bradley & Art Lindsley (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 207.

⁸ Darrow Miller, *Life Work: A Biblical Theology for What You Do Every Day* (Seattle: YWAM Publishing, 2009), 179–81.

⁹ Wayne Grudem & Barry Asmus, *The Poverty of Nations: A Sustainable Solution* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), 105.

¹⁰ Russell Gehrlein, *Immanuel Labor: God’s Presence in our Profession* (Bloomington, IN: Westbow Press, 2018), 162–3.

¹¹ Philip J. Clements, et al., “Doing Business in God’s World: Business Is a Calling” in *Business Ethics Today* (Philadelphia: Center for Christian Business Ethics Today, 2011), 207–24.

¹² Theology of Work Project, *Proverbs in The Bible and Your Work Study Series* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2014), 3.

teaching on work. A thematic study on Proverbs teaching about wealth and poverty yields the following points, in roughly descending order of their prevalence in the book:

- God gives wealth to the righteous and wise (Prov. 3:9–10, 8:18, 12:27, 14:23)
- Foolishness leads to poverty (Prov. 10:4, 11:7, 21:6, 22:16, 26:15, 28:22)
- It is better to be wise than rich (Prov. 15:16, 16:8)
- Wealth only gets one so far (Prov. 11:4, 23:4–5)
- If one has wealth, be generous (Prov. 28:27)
- Poverty can come from oppression (Prov. 13:23)¹³

What this bulleted list somewhat disguises, however, is that the first two points are particularly represented in the book and thus constitute the dominant impression upon its readers.

Reading the Wisdom Literature Cautiously

Many faith and work authors, it is vital to say, use the text carefully and well. Hannah Stolze, to use just one example from the above list, has developed a very strong understanding of the book and its exegesis, including delving into the meanings of various Hebrew terms. Many others do as well. While some authors in any field are slipshod, much faith and work literature exegetes the relevant proverbs honestly and effectively.

And yet, the faith and work movement as a whole risks turning Proverbs specifically, and the Deuteronomistic conception of the Old Testament in general, into an equation, a set of principles that God then promises will make everything work out for a flourishing and profitable business. At its worst, the faith and work use of Proverbs quickly descends into something not much different than self-improvement literature or even a “health and wealth” approach to the Bible. As Roland Murphy states, “[T]he true subtlety of the book is seldom recognized in its popular usage.”¹⁴

The danger, then, is not that faith and work writers quote Proverbs badly or incorrectly. Instead, the danger is that the readers of faith and work literature will take the biblical truths these authors note and divorce them from the broader wisdom

¹³ Texts given are only examples, not a full inventory. For a similar summary, though derived independently, see Tremper Longman, *How to Read Proverbs* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 120.

¹⁴ Roland Murphy, *The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 15.

literature, therefore misunderstanding general biblical truths as if they are perfect equations. It is not wrong for the Theology of Work Project to term Proverbs a “handbook,” so long as it is clear at what level and in what ways said handbook applies.

Just as with the broader Deuteronomistic literature, the reason such misunderstandings can occur is because there is truth to claims that proverbs make. Proverbs represent general truths, the way the world usually works, barring unique circumstances. Therefore, on average, life does turn out the way the proverb says, even in a fallen world. Yet, the truth claim of a proverb is that of a general truth, not a rigid, inviolable law of nature. As Murphy states elsewhere:

J. Williams (*Gnomic Wisdom*, 35–38) has described how the lapidary and piercing style of a proverb bestows on it a certain power. Many proverbs look innocent and a priori, yet they are highly assertive. But they may not be final; rather they act as a goad, a prod to further thought, as explicitly stated in Eccl 12:11. The proverb’s declaratory nature catches our attention, but it also conceals, for it achieves only a slice of reality. That is the nature of a saying: The one who hesitates is lost / Look before you leap. The truth of a saying—call it a partial truth—usually needs another saying to counterbalance it.¹⁵

In fact, reading a given proverb as emphasizing a rigid equation does injustice to the book of Proverbs itself. The book itself emphasizes the general nature of the truths it enjoins. Prov. 26:4–5 provides the classic example:

Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself. (Prov. 26:4)

Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes. (Prov. 26:5)

It beggars belief to imagine that in compiling this collection, the editor¹⁶ accidentally placed these proverbs in sequence without awareness of their seeming contradiction. The inescapable conclusion is that the editor of the book juxtaposed these two proverbs precisely to challenge the reader of the book to work out which would be true in a given situation, to weigh how each provides a general truth that must be held in tension with the other.

¹⁵ Murphy, *Proverbs*, WBC 22 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), xxxv–xxxvi.

¹⁶ Whether one views the compiler as Solomon or a later editor is immaterial to the point.

When it comes to faith, work, and wealth, even Proverbs notes complexities and exceptions to the general rule.¹⁷ What one might term “counterpoint proverbs” cut against the dominant grain of the book. For example, Prov. 22:16 recognizes the way the world actually works, that people do oppress the poor in their efforts to build wealth, efforts that may ultimately fail but do succeed for a time (possibly even a quite long time): “Whoever oppresses the poor to increase his own wealth, or gives to the rich, will only come to poverty.” As noted above, Prov. 13:23 does acknowledge that wealth can come from such oppression: “The fallow ground of the poor would yield much food, but it is swept away through injustice.” As Longman says, “The dominant note of the book should not be allowed to overwhelm the recognition that even Proverbs acknowledges that life is not black and white.”¹⁸

The remainder of the wisdom literature fills out this point. Without reducing either Job or Ecclesiastes to a single point (Jerome’s comments about the meaning of the book of Job being a “slippery eel” ought to be kept in mind.), one of these books’ canonical functions is to counter an over-reading of Proverbs.

Axiomatic to the entire book of Job is that Job was “blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil” (Job 1:1). The reader knows, before the dialogs even begin, that Job did not sin to cause the suffering that would follow. Satan’s accusation in Job 1:9–10 even seems like some faith and work readings of Proverbs: “Then Satan answered the LORD and said, ‘Does Job fear God for no reason? Have you not put a hedge around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land.’”

Job’s friends represent a clear retribution theology, that good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people, a simplistic understanding that matches such an overreading of Proverbs, as well as the remainder of the Deuteronomic corpus. Therefore, if Job is suffering, including extreme financial losses, they conclude he must have sinned. As Longman says, “An initial reading of Proverbs might lead one to the conclusion that those who follow the precepts of wisdom will be rewarded with great success, while those who embrace foolishness will encounter one obstacle after another. Indeed, that is the message Job’s three ‘friends’ and the young Elihu seem to have heard and accepted from the book of Proverbs—at least at first glance.”¹⁹

¹⁷ Raymond van Leeuwen, “Wealth and Poverty: System and Contradiction in Proverbs,” *Hebrew Studies* 33 (1992): 25–36.

¹⁸ Longman, *How to Read Proverbs*, 89.

¹⁹ Longman, *How to Read Proverbs*, 80.

The book of Job explicitly rejects this interpretation by Job's three friends: "After the LORD had spoken these words to Job, the LORD said to Eliphaz the Temanite: 'My anger burns against you and against your two friends, for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has'" (Job 42:7). While Job is eventually restored by the end of the book, even given double, he endures deep suffering and loss even though he has kept a faithful life, even precisely because he has kept a faithful life.²⁰

Similarly, Ecclesiastes represents a sage (Qohelet) struggling deeply with a world that often inverts the seeming equation of Proverbs: "There is a vanity that takes place on earth, that there are righteous people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked, and there are wicked people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous. I said that this also is vanity" (Eccl 8:14). In chapter 2, this cry explicitly extends to work:

I hated all my toil in which I toil under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me, and who knows whether he will be wise or a fool? Yet he will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. So I turned about and gave my heart up to despair over all the toil of my labors under the sun, because sometimes a person who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave everything to be enjoyed by someone who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. What has a man from all the toil and striving of heart with which he toils beneath the sun? For all his days are full of sorrow, and his work is a vexation. Even in the night his heart does not rest. This also is vanity. (Eccl 2:18–23)

And yet, even this, as is typical for the book, is followed by a somewhat more positive spin on the question:

There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? For to the one who pleases him God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, but to the sinner he has given the business

²⁰ To the question, "Then why does Job have to repent in 42:6?" whatever the proper answer may be, chapter 1 and 42:7 do not allow the interpretation that Job's repentance validates the friends' retribution theology. John Calvin's idea that Job repents for a good case that he then pleads poorly seems a reasonable explanation, though it is not necessary to prove the point made here.

of gathering and collecting, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a striving after wind. (Eccl 2:24–26)

The same pattern repeats in chapter 5:

There is a grievous evil that I have seen under the sun: riches were kept by their owner to his hurt, and those riches were lost in a bad venture. And he is father of a son, but he has nothing in his hand. As he came from his mother's womb he shall go again, naked as he came, and shall take nothing for his toil that he may carry away in his hand. This also is a grievous evil: just as he came, so shall he go, and what gain is there to him who toils for the wind? Moreover, all his days he eats in darkness in much vexation and sickness and anger. Behold, what I have seen to be good and fitting is to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of his life that God has given him, for this is his lot. (Eccl 5:13–18)

Qohelet emphasizes that chance occurrences can disrupt the general order of how things should be: "Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to those with knowledge, but time and chance happen to them all" (Eccl 9:11).

In the end, Qohelet cautions against what one might call an idolatry of wealth when it comes to work, recognizing that satisfaction in labor must be independent of wealth creation: "Sweet is the sleep of a laborer, whether he eats little or much, but the full stomach of the rich will not let him sleep" (Eccl 5:12). Ecclesiastes therefore views it as better to work than not, but hardly gives a rosy promise of an easy life. Quite the opposite, work is toil (Hebrew עמל): "Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that he has given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun. Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might, for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going" (Eccl 9:9–10).

Job and Ecclesiastes, then, together remind the believer not to apply the general truths of Proverbs mechanistically; there is always room for exception in individual cases. Those truths work, on average, yet at the individual level, life can always yield the reverse. Wisdom literature must therefore be read carefully and cautiously. The book of Proverbs alone is rich and varied, much less the broader wisdom literature, and work and

vocation are equally rich and varied, so we need all the proverbs—and all the wisdom literature—to develop a correct understanding.

Reading the Wisdom Literature Covenantally

Academic literature has too often described biblical wisdom literature as areligious. Walther Eichrodt, for example, views wisdom as “strongly secular...only loosely connected with religious faith.”²¹ Certainly, wisdom literature is conspicuously different than the remainder of the Old Testament. It has little, if any, emphasis on the grand themes that dominate much of the rest of the Old Testament, such as the patriarchs, redemption, law, prophetic warning, and history. Further, wisdom literature has a clear dependence on creation, providing almost moralistic lessons from the natural order (e.g., Prov. 6:6–11, 30:24–28) that give practical advice for life in this world. Similarly, wisdom is acknowledged implicitly to be something obtainable, at least in part, by non-Israelite cultures, with 1 Kings 4:30 implying that other cultures also had wisdom, even if far inferior to that ascribed to Solomon.

Such recognition of the value of the created order, however, is hardly secular, and to view it as such is a tremendous post-Enlightenment anachronism. Simply put, *nothing* at the time of the wisdom sages was considered secular; neither inside nor outside of Israel was any part of daily life seen to be merely natural. John Collins states, “It is doubtful whether any literature from the ancient Near East can really be described as secular... Wisdom theology is creation theology, and is therefore based on a fundamental presupposition of Israelite religion.”²² The Israelites always understood that “Behind such pragmatism stood God’s will.”²³

Likewise, the wisdom literature itself considers God to be the one who upholds the general truths to enunciate. Proverbs 1:7 is the clearly religious theme of the book: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.” Therefore, as Crenshaw states, “To begin with, it is essential to reject the common assumption that old wisdom, as it is usually called, lacked religious content altogether.”²⁴ Accordingly, any Israelite wisdom was firmly founded in a faith context:

²¹ Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox, 1967), II, 81–2.

²² John Collins, *Jewish Wisdom in the Hellenistic Age*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 3.

²³ James Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), 85.

²⁴ Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom*, 92. His distinction of “old wisdom” versus more recent wisdom, enunciated first by H. D. Preuss, whether held or rejected, does not impact this point, as the “old wisdom” is the portion of the book alleged by some critics to be secular.

"Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths" (Prov 3:5–6). As Murphy notes, "Sayings about the Lord appear cheek by jowl with sayings about human experience. Ultimately wisdom is never secular, nor does it rest on presuppositions alien to faith in the Lord."²⁵

Further, to be religious in Israelite faith was to be covenantal. Therefore, if the wisdom sages were operating in a religious worldview, as argued above, they were operating more specifically in a covenantal worldview. In Israel covenant was the very basis for there to be any relationship at all between God and his people, and a covenantal understanding therefore undergirds all wisdom literature. Murphy argues rightly:

It would be a mistake to characterize the wisdom experience as a species of "natural theology" within the Bible. True, it deals with creation and with day-to-day living, but this is in a concrete supernatural situation to which God has called his children; God is available to them through this experience. The Israelite sages were Yahwists. What they learned about the Lord from creation and experience was necessarily associated with what they learned from their historical traditions. The manner and style may have differed, but it was the one Lord who was communicated.²⁶

He continues:

In short, the wisdom experience is to be described as a faith experience. The shaping of Israel's views of the world, and of the activity of God behind and in it, was done in an ambience of faith, and was characterized by trust and reliance upon God.... Yahwistic belief has doubtless colored and affected Israelite doctrine on wisdom. After all, the sages believed in Yahweh and what he had done for Israel. But it would be impossible (perhaps illegitimate?) to separate out within the wisdom books what is due specifically to Yahwistic belief. The epigrammatic association of wisdom and fear of the Lord (Prov 1:7) is an example of this profound and inextricable unity, because 'fear of the Lord' would have certain nuances from Israelite history...and worship.... 'Lord' (*yhwh*) is Israel's God, the

²⁵ Murphy, *Tree of Life*, 115.

²⁶ Murphy, *Tree of Life*, 124.

one who is encountered in the wisdom experience, whether or not the 'official' name is used.²⁷

The realization that the sages were fundamentally and foundationally covenantal, even if not verbally enunciating that foundation at each turn, helps further condition the use of the wisdom literature for faith and work. Covenantal thinking operates at the level of the visible covenant.²⁸ Covenant blessings and curses would come on God's visible people, the nation of Israel, not person-by-person. This nation was always a mix of those who truly believed (therefore part of the invisible people of God) and those who were merely marked as part of the covenant but did not truly follow God (cf. 1 Kings 19:18, Rom. 11:4–6). When covenant curses such as drought or invasion came upon the nation, faithful believers still suffered, even though they truly followed the Lord. Similarly, when covenant blessings such as a bountiful harvest came upon the nation, merely nominal believers enjoyed those covenant blessings, even though they did not truly follow the Lord.

Covenantal thinking, then, leaves room for and even expects exceptions at the individual level. Blessing and curse come corporately. Individuals who have done no wrong can be swept up in misfortune, and individuals who have done badly can benefit from the overflow of blessing. Whether or not God covenantally judges modern nation-states,²⁹ the dynamic is the same: an entrepreneur could rigorously follow the dictums of Proverbs yet be caught up in a broader economic collapse and lose his or her business.

Further, the covenantal relationship between God and his people allows long delays before covenantal curses come to pass. Not only does Leviticus 26 indicate a remarkably long-lasting patience when God brings curses, but many biblical texts summarize his patience in bringing even well-deserved calamity (e.g., Gen. 15:16, 2 Pet. 3:9). Indeed, the whole of 1–2 Kings testifies to a remarkably delayed retribution upon both Israel and Judah for their sins. Even the Northern kingdom of Israel, apostate from the very start, prospered tremendously under kings such as Jeroboam II (2 Kings 14:23–29).

²⁷ Murphy, *Tree of Life*, 125–6. Note that the universalism Murphy then draws from this fact should be questioned, but he is correct that the sages were Yahwistic.

²⁸ See Westminster Confession of Faith XXV.

²⁹ W. Fullilove, "Does God Judge Nation-States Today?," *The Washington Institute for Faith, Vocation, and Culture* (7 May 2020), accessed 24 Feb. 2025, <https://washingtoninst.org/does-god-judge-nation-states-today/>.

The New Testament further complicates this dynamic. The cross immediately invalidates a pure retribution theology, as Jesus, completely faithful to the covenant, is crucified for sinners. John 15:18 indicates that the same should be expected by his followers. Of course, eventually the New Covenant will come to pass with curses on those who reject God, but that will only be upon Jesus' return, which he chooses to delay (2 Pet. 3:9). Covenant, then, means rewards do come to those who live with wisdom, but those rewards ultimately are guaranteed only in eternity. Christ is the true wisdom of God (Col. 1:24) and in him the kingdom has already come, but it is not yet fully present, including in work.³⁰ Temporally, those who do rightly may see great blessing and success in this life, but they may also end up suffering, not seeing immediate—or even ever—success in their temporal lives.³¹

Faith and Work with Wisdom

The solution is not to use Proverbs any less when approaching faith and work. If anything, the book ought to be used more, just not misused. The truths of Proverbs, as with the rest of the Deuteronomistic literature, are faithful, good, and essential for the Christian life, including but not limited to the workplace. We must teach them rightly and well, enunciating the way God *would* have us work in the world. And we should still expect proverbial truths to be completely true...proverbially. It will work better to do business God's way, on average.

The point is balance. Just as this article works to correct one imbalance, it must not feed the opposite imbalance. When Proverbs *does* provide clear moral directives, those directives are binding, whether or not they lead to worldly success.³² Further, God *is* active in the modern world, upholding and sustaining it. God does act—again, on average—to make things work out in his proverbial ways. Those who follow God should pray for him to work, call on him to work, even expect him to work. The recognition of the complexity of Proverbs and the wisdom literature must not become an excuse for

³⁰ W. Fullilove, "Failing the Next Generation on Faith and Work," *The Washington Institute for Faith, Vocation, and Culture* (20 Feb. 2025), accessed 21 Feb. 2025, <https://washingtoninst.org/failing-the-next-generation-on-faith-and-work/>.

³¹ The claim here is not that the author of Proverbs has the eschaton in view, but that reading Proverbs as part of the Christian canon allows an understanding of how individual proverbs do eventually come to full realization in the new heavens and new earth.

³² Such a recognition, of course, can become legalism, but it need not be legalism to argue that grace received leads to behavioral implications. This is merely the Pauline indicative and imperative.

passivity or inaction. Christians at work do not need to protect God by creating low expectations. There can be change, now, in this life.

Yet, as we emphasize the value of working God's way, we must carefully avoid giving the wrong impression to those we teach, feeling that they now have a roadmap to undoubted commercial and personal success and prosperity. If we allow that impression to endure, we are only setting those we teach up for a crisis of faith should it not work out the way they hoped. The whole of the wisdom literature reminds us that God's blessings on doing work "his way" are a general truth, not a specific individual guarantee. We must not promise people something more that God does, and we must not become Job's friends and assume that the man or woman whose business or career is not flourishing has somehow failed to heed God's word. It might be so, but when it is not, it could be a fallen world waiting to be redeemed.

How do we help people encounter both the text of Proverbs and the broader wisdom literature this way? We start small and build outward. We meditate on a proverb, discerning its general truth, asking the questions of when, where, and how it applies. If it contains moral directives, we purpose to live them out, simply because they are correct. Next, we search the book for every other proverb that also bears on the issue at hand, and we do the same for each of them. We wrestle with cases when two proverbial truths nuance each other. We try to synthesize their teaching, appreciate the nuances, and apply them to our lives of faith and work. Then, we expand the biblical conversation even further, pulling in the remainder of the wisdom literature and ultimately even the entire Bible. We therefore end up cultivating wisdom slowly, over years and decades, in dialog with God through his word. This hard work makes the book of Proverbs, and the wisdom literature as a whole, much more difficult, but much richer, providing us a wealth far beyond riches that "sprout wings and fly away" (Prov. 23:4–5, Luke 12:13–21).

BOOK REVIEWS

Scott Redd, *Ezekiel: A Prophet in Exile*. Focus on the Bible. Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2026. 288 pp. \$19.99, paperback.

Scott Redd, Pastor of Briarwood Presbyterian Church (PCA) and Visiting Lecturer in Old Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C., is known to many readers for his contributions to Old Testament studies. This book serves as an outflow of many years of teaching the prophets, including the Book of Ezekiel.

This book, *Ezekiel: A Prophet in Exile*, is in the Focus on the Bible series, which is designed primarily for pastors and small group leaders, and at the end of each chapter, there are questions designed for discussion about the text. These questions serve as valuable pedagogical tools, particularly for study groups that want to gain a deeper understanding of the text.

Redd's treatment of the book of Ezekiel combines both a detailed reading of the text in its ancient Near Eastern context and a distinct Christological perspective. This latter focus is seen in the various New Testament connections highlighted throughout each chapter, such as the reading of Gog and Magog in light of Revelation 20:7–10 (226). At the same time, Redd helpfully opens up discussions of historical context, such as the name of Daniel and its possible, but uncertain, links to an ancient Ugaritic story which mentions a certain "Dan'el" (93). Redd also makes many pastoral applications. For example, he observes, "The covenant community of Ezekiel's time is much more similar to the covenant community today than we might first imagine" (255). Redd guides the reader from the text and context of Ezekiel to the Scriptures' current application in light of Christ.

The book is divided into three main parts: "The Reality and Rationale for Judgment Against Jerusalem 1–24"; "Global Judgment of Israel's Enemies Ezekiel 25:1–32:32"; and "Blessing and the Restoration of the Temple Ezekiel 33:1–48:35." Part one further subdivides into two sections: "The Reality of Divine Absence from the Temple" (Ezekiel 1–7) and "The Rationale of Divine Absence from the Temple" (Ezekiel 8–24). In like manner, part three also subdivides into two sections: "Global Judgment and Restoration for Israel" (Ezekiel 33–39) and "The New Temple Order" (Ezekiel 40–48).

In the introduction, Redd presents the key theological themes and argues for traditional views on exilic dating and Ezekielian authorship by situating the prophet Ezekiel at the Chebar Canal in Babylon during the exile, where his prophecy foretells the

fall of Jerusalem and its consequences (10). He also provides helpful charts for dating, including the Gregorian calendar and relative dating (15).

Part one, chapter one, examines the introduction to the book of Ezekiel (1:1–3), the divine chariot throne vision (1:4–28), and Ezekiel’s call (2:1–3:27). In chapter two of the book, Redd helps break down the four performances (4:1–5:4) of vision one (1:4–28). These performances include “Besieging the Brick” (4:1–3), “Lying on the Side” (4:4–8), “Rationing the Food” (4:9–17), and “Cutting and Burning the Hair” (5:1–4). Redd not only shows the structure but also clarifies for the reader the intent and meaning of these difficult performances by the prophet.

Section two of part one begins with the second vision (Ezekiel 8–11). Alongside a helpful structuring of the text, Redd highlights important thematic elements of the vision, commenting, for example, that “the vision, therefore, includes both justice and mercy, conviction and consolation, as a reminder to Ezekiel’s audience” (60). Redd serves the reader well in working through difficult imagery such as “The Faithless Bride” (Ezekiel 16:1–63).

Part two begins with the oracles against the nations. Redd clarifies the role and nature of these oracles, stating, “These oracles function as much to show God’s global reign and therefore global application of justice as they do to communicate divine deliverance for the people of God” (153). Such oracles often can be hard to preach, but Redd walks the reader through each nation’s section. As with the book of Ezekiel itself, Redd gives much attention to the oracle against Egypt in chapter 13.

Part three of this book focuses on the restoration themes of the Book of Ezekiel. Redd displays this restoration through the lens of the New Testament. For example, when discussing Ezekiel 34, Redd addresses John 10:1–18 in light of Ezekiel 34 to show Christ as the true Good Shepherd: “The appearance and ministry of Jesus Christ and His apostles give us a first glimpse of what true and full restoration might look like” (206).

This volume also serves as an introduction to other major commentaries, offering a brief overview of a number of key works. Notable among the commentaries on the book of Ezekiel are Moshe Greenberg’s in the Anchor Yale Bible series, Walther Zimmerli’s *Hermeneia* commentary, and Daniel Block’s in the New International Commentary of the Old Testament series. Redd’s work situates itself as a complement to these major commentaries, whether in terms of Block’s pastoral theological depth, Zimmerli’s foundational structure on holiness and glory, or Greenberg’s ancient Near Eastern understanding. If there is one small critique, it would be the lack of a final bibliography to bring together the sources referenced throughout the book, which would offer an additional, easily accessible starting place for further study for pastors and students.

I highly recommend Redd's book. He displays a deep knowledge of the book of Ezekiel, its New Testament connections, and the context of the ancient Near East. This is an excellent resource on the Book of Ezekiel for preachers and teachers. As a friend and former student of Scott Redd, I continue to learn more from him about the Scriptures and specifically the book of Ezekiel.

Jason Nuwayhid, MDiv/MABS 2025

University of Edinburgh (Ph.D. candidate)

Jerry A. Gladson, *An Introduction to the Five Scrolls: Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther*. Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2025. xxvii + 511 pages. \$114.95, hardback.

Gladson's *An Introduction to the Five Scrolls* provides introductions to each of the five books of the Megilloth, ordered according to the Jewish liturgical calendar. Writing primarily for seminary and graduate students, Gladson summarizes the critical consensus regarding each of these books. As he states, "[T]his work offers only a summary of a vast field of research. Nor have I tried to advance new, original insights into this literature" (xxvi). For each book, Gladson summarizes the state of critical scholarship regarding: (1) the historical and cultural setting (including discussions of authorship, date, provenance, and the state of the Hebrew text), (2) literary style (including genre, compositional theories, and rhetorical features), (3) theological interpretation (including historical-critical, feminist, and postmodern approaches), and (4) liturgical reception in both the Jewish and Christian traditions.

An Introduction to the Five Scrolls needs to be judged on what it intends to be, a summary of the common critical approach to each of the five books of the Megilloth. *Nota bene*: **critical** scholarship. This book provides the reader with what Gladson has advertised, nothing more; it provides a summary of critical theories, not preparation to exegete, teach, or preach.

Gladson largely succeeds at his stated task, and he should be praised for providing an easy reference for the state of the conversation as well as for a 100-page bibliography, a full 20% of the book. That said, this bibliography is also worth careful analysis, as *An Introduction to the Five Scrolls* is an update of Gladson's 2009 work *The Five Exotic Scrolls of the Hebrew Bible* (Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 2009).

The first major critique regarding Gladson's bibliography in light of his overall purpose is its inconsistency in updating, leaving this volume showing the age of the original edition. For instance, "recent years" often means the 1970s (113), language presumably carried over from the original work.

Looking more deeply, only between 5–6% of the sources in the bibliography are from 2010–the present, compared to over 38% from 1990–2009 and 26% from 1970–1989, each almost the same length of time. Even spotting Gladson a few years to come in the 2020s and another year or two for the volume to reach production, it is somewhat difficult to imagine that scholarly output on the Megilloth declined so precipitously in the past two decades. Further, some of the five books show much more interaction with recent scholarship than others, with Ruth, Song, and Lamentations receiving noticeably more new sources than Esther and Ecclesiastes. This imbalance at times impacts interpretation. For instance, Gladson seemingly accepts a metrical approach to Hebrew poetry (188, 223), an approach still extant, but increasingly questioned by modern scholars.

As a second major area of critique, at the level of the overall work, Gladson is to be commended for at least stating the traditional positions on issues such as authorship and providing the arguments for those positions. For instance, he does at least consider Solomonic authorship of some poems in the Song of Songs (14). That said, his consistent pattern in all five books is then to move on and conclude against that traditional position. In terms of summarizing current critical scholarship, of course, he has simply been accurate in doing so. Nor does one need to oppose every critical statement Gladson makes. For instance, an anthological approach to the Song (27, 50) can easily fit within traditional orthodoxy.

One does wish, though, that Gladson would also have considered being more critical of the critical positions. At times, he does exactly this. For instance, he accurately notes that resonance in a given time period does not mean that a text originates in that period (109), and that not all tensions in a text indicate multiple authors (258). Yet, too often, such critiques are missed, even when the consensus of critical scholarship is, in the end, just an assertion. For instance, Gladson views Ruth as having significant embellishment during an oral stage of transmission (109), something that is possible but completely unprovable, since the only version of Ruth available to the modern interpreter is the written text. Similarly, he argues that the different acrostic structures of the poems in Lamentations indicate different authors (195), seemingly ignoring the fact that a single author can vary his or her structure when writing different works.

At the more specific level, several factors make *An Introduction to the Five Scrolls* a somewhat inefficient read:

First, it can be difficult to discern when Gladson is giving his own opinion and when he is summarizing the opinions of others. He seems to argue that Qohelet is the author of Ecclesiastes (248), but then clearly says not (259, 292). These inconsistencies are likely not inconsistencies in his own thought, but simply the difficulty of tracking when he is speaking for himself (e.g., 75) and when he is summarizing others' thoughts (e.g., 262). In many cases (e.g., 314), at least this reader had difficulty discerning.

Second, the vast amount of scholarship these books often makes the theological interpretation sections of *An Introduction to the Five Scrolls* into a proverbial laundry list, one paragraph after another of “This scholar says... that scholar says... (230, 298, 333).

Third, this volume is highly repetitive (e.g., 114 vs. 142, 113 vs. 160, and many others) and could have been streamlined. For instance, this reviewer threw up his hands the fourth time Gladson discussed the definition of an acrostic (218) in Lamentations and completely lost count of the number of times Gladson mentioned that Esther provides an etiology for Purim.

None of these factors eliminate the value in Gladson’s work. It *does* provide what it promises, an overall *summary* of critical scholarship. The reader should just not expect anything beyond what Gladson promises. For that reason, the volume will be more useful as a handy reference for professors or students and somewhat less useful as an aid for those working in preaching and ecclesial ministries.

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Catherine Conybeare, *Augustine the African*. New York: Liveright, 2025. xx + 268 pp. \$31.99, hardcover.

“For whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance: but whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that he hath” (Matt. 13:12 KJV). As regards history and biography, some figures and tales simply continue to receive one thoughtful treatment upon another, while still others languish unaddressed.

Augustine of Hippo does not suffer from lack of biographical attention. Peter Brown’s *Augustine of Hippo* has set the bar for decades now, plotting Augustine in the world of late antiquity and amid a dizzying array of characters, conceptions, and challenges.¹ Carol Harrison’s *Augustine: Christian Truth and Fractured Humanity* contextualizes his theological work, taking Confessions and debates with Pelagians and weaving them together artfully.² Miles Hollingworth’s intellectual biography locates the early Christian bishop within the interplay of several intellectual and spiritual streams and at the crisis points of key doctrinal and moral convictions.³ Most recently, Catherine

¹ Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography, Second Edition* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000).

² Carol Harrison, *Augustine: Christian Truth and Fractured Humanity* (Christian Theology in Context; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

³ Miles Hollingworth, *Augustine of Hippo: An Intellectual Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

Conybeare's *Augustine the African* seeks to interpret Augustine afresh in 2025—so far as we can—given that the vast majority of his formation and then his Christian service took place in North Africa rather than Rome or Milan. With the release of this latest major treatment of Augustine, the area of biographical study, which was already richly blessed, continues to receive grace upon grace.

Conybeare really does show value in attending to Augustine's African context. Most noteworthy is her chapter on the Punic language. Helpful too is her attention to his friendship with Marcellinus, Roman official there during and after the Council of Carthage. The study repeatedly plots crises and narrative events on a geographic map to great effect, perhaps nowhere quite so clarifying as when showing just how Alaric's siege of Rome in August 410 would have consequence for life in Hippo Regius in North Africa.

Conybeare's book is not the first to seek to interpret Augustine outside the mainstream Western experience. Justo González has ably considered Augustine the mestizo in a small book.⁴ Here, however, there's very good attention to the African context both as illuminating factor helping us better perceive Augustine and as limiting factor marking out the bounds of available data and perception. The chapter on the Punic language helps in showing how Bishop Augustine clearly minded to deliver (at great political cost) vernacular pastoral provision to Punic-speakers, and it also marks out the limits of what we can know about Augustine's own fluency (or lack thereof) in this local language. Herein is not tokenism but clear, data-based analysis that shows genuine payoff both in insight revealed and limitations no longer concealed. Having read many biographies and most of Augustine's writings, I still found the borders of the known to be extended in some places and more carefully marked out in others.

There are still limits to this biography. It only does so much, as is true of each of the excellent studies on Augustine. The book notes theological disputes. It offers very little by way of conceptual clarification regarding their nature. The study offers character study of Ambrose of Milan. It concerns itself only rarely, however, with any prior Christian tradition as prompt or source for Augustine's own practice and principles. If Hollingworth's biography focuses almost entirely on such matters of intellectual genealogy and development, apparently there was little left for Conybeare to concern herself in that regard.⁵ Additionally, the book shows very little concern for Augustine's

⁴ Justo González, *The Mestizo Augustine: A Theologian Between Two Cultures* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016).

⁵ Interestingly, Conybeare's previous monograph does quite a bit of heavy spadework in this regard by offering careful readings of the Cassiacum Dialogues of his early Christian years (*The Irrational Augustine* [Oxford Early Christian Studies; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006]). Only portions of that study

piety and ascetical practice, as relates to the deep and diverse monastic tradition that was already vibrant and would continue to be so. If Peter Brown's biography sets the gold standard for plotting the thinker's influence in a world of competing spiritualities and rules for living, then here too is precious little to concern this biographer.

All that said, Conybeare's biography truly does contribute to the study of Augustine. It adds another element, local flavor of the North African sort. The Berber mother. The Punic vernacular of the locals. The rural metaphors frequently marking his sermons. Conybeare helps even the longtime reader of Augustine catch a host of features that could easily pass by unremarked. She also makes entry into the story accessible to the novice. She is masterly in giving single paragraph surveys, and the book also includes helpful resources to keep an eye on the big picture (a list of characters and a timeline).

Augustine was finally buried in Pavia, just outside Milan. Still further, his tomb lies just above the crypt of Boethius, the great medieval mind who aimed to comprehend the classical and Christian streams. Conybeare suggests that herein is an enacted parable, losing his African identity and placing him atop a western and European project. Is that parable instructive or just riddling? It is perhaps worth concluding with another verse from Matthew's recounting of Jesus's instruction about his parables. Matthew 13:13 (KJV) adds: "They seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand." A good biography does not add life—it is too late for such a task—but it just might grant eyes to see what is truly signified therein. Those curious to know more will find that Catherine Conybeare's book offers aid in seeing and hearing and, thus, hope of better understanding *Augustine the African*.

Michael Allen

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Charles Murray, *Taking Religion Seriously*. New York: Encounter Books, 2025. 185 pp. \$29.99, hardcover.

Recent years have witnessed more than a few public figures announcing and recounting their conversions to Christianity. Perhaps the best known is Ayaan Hirsi Ali, an ex-Muslim who was formerly associated with the so-called "New Atheists." (Her friend Richard Dawkins is still in shock.) Other converts include historian Niall Ferguson,

appear piecemeal here, and the samplings conveyed therein skew far more to the non-Christian sources and traditions.

author Paul Kingsnorth, journalist Molly Worthen, and Wikipedia co-founder Larry Sanger. Less recent and less publicized, but no less significant, is the journey to Christian faith of the political scientist Charles Murray.

Murray is currently the Hayek Emeritus Scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative think-tank, and is best known for his books *Losing Ground* (1984), *The Bell Curve* (co-authored with Richard Herrnstein; 1994), and *Coming Apart* (2012). His latest book, *Taking Religion Seriously*, is very different from his previous publications (not least in its relative brevity). It is an autobiographical account of his pilgrimage from “enlightened” skepticism to acceptance of the existence of God and the central historical claims of Christianity. It is not intended as a work of apologetics (“I don’t proselytize,” he writes) and Murray is careful to point out that he is speaking to issues beyond his areas of academic expertise. Nevertheless, the purpose of the book is to recount his *intellectual* journey from “happy agnostic” to Christian theist, and to make the case that, contrary to the received wisdom among the intellectual elite of Western society, there are good rational grounds for religious—specifically, Christian—beliefs.

The 160-page book is divided into two parts, “Taking God Seriously” and “Taking Christianity Seriously,” and thus it loosely follows the structure of C. S. Lewis’s apologetic in *Mere Christianity*. (This is not coincidental, given that Murray credits Lewis as one of the major influences on his thought.) According to opening chapter, the journey began not with Murray himself, but with his wife, Catherine. In the months following their first child’s birth in 1985, she discovered that “her love for her daughter surpassed anything she had ever known”; indeed, it was a love “far more than evolution required” (7). This realization launched Catherine on a spiritual quest that left her husband little more than bemused. In fact, Catherine’s subsequent religious experiences led Murray to conclude that he suffers from “a perceptual deficit in spirituality” (17). He simply didn’t *feel* any need for religion. This was partly a matter of personality and temperament, but also, he came to realize, the result of “Western modernity” both distracting him from religious questions and shielding him from “the agonizing losses, pains, and sorrows that were part of human life since the dawn of humankind” (17–18). The road of spiritual experience was not open to him. Fortunately, as it turned out, the road of intellectual curiosity would do just as well.

Chapters 3 through 5 chart the reasoning that led Murray to accept a supernaturalist, theistic worldview. An early nudge came from noticing “the mathematical simplicity of many scientific phenomena” (22). Why *does* the physical universe display a striking mathematical order that can be expressed in such elegant and relatively simple formulae? “It was almost as if someone had planned it that way,” Murray reflects (23). A stronger prodding came as he began to wrestle with the age-old

question, “Why is there something rather than nothing?” What surprised Murray most was how *unreflective* he had been hitherto, and what a crudely anthropomorphic conception of God he had been assuming.

What finally led Murray to accept the existence of God, however, was a version of the design argument. In the early 2000s, Murray read Martin Rees’s *Just Six Numbers*. A highly respected scientist, Rees was not a religious believer, yet his book “compelled me to accept that the universe was fine-tuned to permit life” (36). Murray concluded that there are only three viable options: (1) there is only one universe and “we lucked into an inexpressibly small chance”; (2) there are innumerable universes and thus it is no surprise that one of them (ours!) permits life to exist; (3) there is only one universe and it was *designed* to support life (43). Murray became convinced that the third option was the most plausible by far, at least for those not blinded by materialistic prejudices. Furthermore, his studies revealed, there is strong *empirical* evidence (paranormal phenomena, near-death experiences, and experiences of terminal lucidity) that consciousness cannot be explained in purely materialistic terms. Thus, in addition to the existence of God, Murray confesses, “I had to acknowledge the possibility that I have a soul” (59).

These interrelated epiphanies opened the door to giving Christianity a second look—or more accurately, a first *serious* look. Murray’s research for his book *Human Accomplishments* forced him to recognize the unique role that Christianity played in the positive development of Western culture, particularly in the sciences and the arts. Soon afterwards, C. S. Lewis entered the story, as Murray was challenged to read and critically engage with Lewis’s *Mere Christianity* at the prompting of a White House staffer. “Two large issues stood out,” he recalls. “What did I think of Lewis’s argument about a Moral Law that originates with God? What did I think of Lewis’s assertion that you do not have the option of saying that Jesus was a great moral teacher—that instead you are required to decide whether he was a lunatic, a liar, or the Son of God?” (75).

Reflecting on the first question, Murray became persuaded by Lewis’s argument that there is a transcendent Moral Law to which we are all subject, and that fact can best be explained by the existence of a transcendent Moral Lawgiver. In particular, Murray concluded, our instinct that altruism is morally commendable—even when the beneficiaries are not genetic relatives of the benefactors—cannot be explained on a Darwinian evolutionary basis. If Lewis’s moral argument is sound, then not only does God have a personal relationship with us, but God must himself be “ultimate Goodness” (84).

Could it be possible, then, that God *loves* us—even to the extent that, as the New Testament proclaims, God sent his Son into the world to give us eternal life? At this point in his journey, Murray realized he had no option but to investigate the credibility of the

New Testament, especially the four Gospel accounts. Long story short: Murray “did the reading,” on both sides of the debate, and concluded that the Gospels are historically reliable sources, written only decades after the events described, and based on credible eyewitness testimony. Not only does that mean we can know what Jesus really taught; it also means we must take seriously the reports of Jesus’s miracles, and most significantly of all, the claim that Jesus was seen alive again after his public execution. In the space of several pages, Murray neatly summarizes the historical evidence for the resurrection and the shortcomings of naturalistic explanations.

The final chapter of the book ties things together by answering the “So what?” question. Murray seeks to impress upon his readers not only that there is good evidence to support the central claims of Christianity—enough to satisfy any modern intellectual—but also that *it really matters*, both for this life and for the next.

On the whole, *Taking Religion Seriously* will be an encouragement to Christian readers, while skeptics will find many of their assumptions and prejudices challenged. There are some disappointments along the way: Murray still accepts the evolutionary account of human origins, regards the birth narratives of Christ merely as “beautiful fables” (123), and makes some confused (if not unorthodox) comments about how to understand the deity of Christ (156–57).

Such blemishes aside, at least five useful lessons can be drawn from the book.

(1) Western secular intellectuals typically dismiss Christianity not because they have responsibly considered the evidence and remain unpersuaded, but because they have been preconditioned by the reigning wisdom that there *are* no respectable intellectual grounds for Christian beliefs. To adapt a line from G. K. Chesterton: Christianity has not been studied and found wanting; it has been found distasteful and left unstudied.

(2) In connection with the previous point: intellectual and social peer pressure plays a major role in explaining why secular academics don’t take religion more seriously. As Murray candidly admits, one reason he was so resistant to the evidence was because he belonged to “the tribe of the smart people” and didn’t want “to be thought credulous and foolish and get kicked out of the tribe” (147).

(3) The evidence of the truth of Christianity is there in abundance for those who have eyes to see it—that is, for those who are not blinkered by naturalistic presuppositions and intellectual snobbery.

(4) While philosophical and historical arguments may not be the common way people come to Christian faith, but they are nevertheless important, especially when the converts have an audience of intellectual peers. Lewis provides one such case; Murray

now another. In both cases, notably, the journey involved philosophical reflection *and* a series of divine providences.

(5) Christian scholarship matters! Consider a selective list of the scholars whose work Murray credits with changing his mind over time: Stephen Meyer, Larry Hurtado, Paul Barnett, Richard Bauckham, Brand Pitre, Craig Blomberg, Michael Bird, Peter J. Williams, N. T. Wright, Gary Habermas, and—*nota bene*—RTS Professor Emeritus, Charles E. Hill. (Let the record show that Murray also consulted the works of skeptical scholars such as Brian Greene, Sean Carroll, John Dominic Crossan, and Bart Ehrman—further underscoring the importance of robust scholarship in defense of orthodox Christianity.)

The overall thesis of *Taking Religion Seriously* is relatively modest: anyone who approaches questions of religion with an open mind, and a scientist's commitment to following the evidence wherever it leads, will discover that there is a serious case to be made against materialistic atheism and in favor of Christian theism. Whether any unbeliever *can* approach such matters with a truly open mind, apart from a work of divine grace, is not a question raised in the book. Nevertheless, Murray's personal testimony is cause for celebration: "God's grace has become real to me" (153). One can almost hear the angels rejoicing in heaven.

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