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Exodus and Work

Theology of Work Project

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Exodus and Work

The theology of work does not begin with our understanding of what God wants us to do or even how to do it. It begins with the God who has revealed himself to us as Creator and Redeemer and who shows us how to follow him by being formed in his character. We do what God wants us to do by becoming more like God. Through reading Exodus, we hear God describe his own character, and we see this particular God actively forming his people. As his people, Christians cannot settle for doing our work according to godly principles unless we apprehend these truths as uniquely rooted in *this certain* God who does *this particular kind* of redemptive work through the *unique* person of his Son by the power of *his* Holy Spirit. In essence, we learn that God's character is revealed in his work, and his work shapes our work. Following God in our work is thus a major topic in Exodus, even though work is not the primary point of the book.

We find much in Exodus that speaks to everyday work. But these instructions and rules take place in a work context that existed over three thousand years ago. Time has not stood still, and our workplaces have changed. Some passages, such as "You shall not commit murder" (Exodus 20:13), seem to fit today's context much as they did in Moses' time. Others, such as "If someone's ox hurts the ox of another, so that it dies, then they shall sell the live ox and divide the price of it" (Ex. 21:35), seem less directly applicable to most modern workplaces. How can we honor, obey and apply God's word in Exodus without falling into the traps of legalism or misapplication?

To answer these questions, we start with the understanding that this book is a narrative. Just as it helped Israel to locate itself in God's story, it helps us to find out how we fit into the fuller expression of the narrative that is our Bible today. The purpose and shape of God's work not only frames our identity as his people, it also directs the work God has called us to do.

Introduction to Exodus

The book of Exodus opens and closes with Israel at work. At the onset, the Israelites are at work for the Egyptians. By the book's end, they have finished the work of building the tabernacle according to the Lord's instructions (Ex. 40:33). God did not deliver Israel *from* work. He set Israel free *for* work. God released them from oppressive work under the ungodly king of Egypt and led them to a new kind of work under his gracious and holy kingship. Although the book's title in Christian Bibles, "Exodus,"

means “the way out,” [1] the forward-leaning orientation of Exodus could legitimately lead us to conclude that the book is really about the way *in*, for it recounts Israel’s entrance to the Mosaic covenant which will frame their existence, not only in the wilderness wanderings around the Sinai Peninsula but also in their settled life in the Promised Land. The book conveys how Israel ought to understand their God and how this nation should work and worship in their new land. On all counts, Israel must be mindful of how their life under God would be distinct from and better than life for those who followed the gods of Canaan. Even today, *what* we do in work flows from *why* we do it and for *whom* we are ultimately working. We usually don’t have to look very far in society to find examples of harsh and oppressive work. Certainly, God wants us to find better ways to conduct our business and to treat others. But the way *into* that new way of acting depends on seeing ourselves as recipients of God’s salvation, knowing what God’s work is, and training ourselves to follow his words.

The book of Exodus begins about 400 years after the point where Genesis ends. In Genesis, Egypt had been a hospitable place where God providentially elevated Joseph so that he could save the lives of Abraham’s descendants (Genesis 50:20). This accords well with God’s promises to make Abraham into a great nation, to bless him and make him a blessing to others, to make his name great, and to bless all families of the earth through him (Genesis 12:2-3). In the book of Exodus, however, Egypt was an oppressive place where Israel’s growth raised the specter of death. The Egyptians hardly saw Israel as a divine blessing, though they did not want to let go of their slave labor. In the end, Israel’s deliverance at the Red Sea cost Pharaoh and his people many lives. In light of God’s promises to Abraham’s chosen family and God’s intentions to bless the nations, the people of God in the book of Exodus are very much in transition. The magnitude of Israel’s numbers indicated God’s favor yet the next generation of male children faced immediate extinction (Ex. 1:15-16). The nation as a whole was still not in the land God had promised to them.

The entire Pentateuch echoes this theme of partial fulfillment. God’s promises to Abraham of descendants, favored relationship with God, and a land in which to live all express God’s intentions, yet they are all in some state of jeopardy throughout the narrative. [2] Among the five books of the Pentateuch, Exodus in particular takes up the element of relationship with God both in terms of God’s deliverance of his people from Egypt and the establishment of his covenant with them at Sinai. [3] This is especially significant for how we read the book for insights about our work today. We value the shape and content of this book as we remember that our relationship with God through Jesus Christ flows from what we see here, and it orients all of our life and work around God’s intentions.

To capture Israel’s character as a nation in transition, we outline the book and assess its contribution to the theology of work according to the geographical stages of its journey beginning in Egypt, then at the Red Sea and on the way to Sinai, and finally at Sinai itself.

Israel in Egypt (Exodus 1:1-13:16)

Israel's mistreatment by the Egyptians provides the background and impetus for their redemption. Pharaoh did not allow them to follow Moses into the wilderness to worship the Lord and thus denied a measure of their religious freedom. But their oppression as workers in the Egyptian economic system is what really gets our attention. God hears the cry of his people and does something about it. But we must remember that the people of Israel do not groan because of work in general, but because of the harshness of their work. In response, God does not deliver them into a life of total rest, but a release from oppressive work.

The Harshness of the Israelites' Slave Labor in Egypt (Exodus 1:8-14)

The work that the Egyptians forced on the Israelites was evil in motive and cruel in nature. The opening scene presents the land as filled with Israelites who had been fruitful and had multiplied. This echoes God's creational intent (Genesis 1:28 and 9:1) as well as his promise to Abraham and his chosen descendants (Genesis 17:6; 35:11; 47:27). As a nation, they were destined to bless the world. Under a previous administration, the Israelites had royal permission to live in the land and to work it. But here the new king of Egypt sensed in their numbers a threat to his national security and thus decided to deal "shrewdly" with them (Ex. 1:10). We are not told whether or not the Israelites were a genuine threat. The emphasis falls on Pharaoh's destructive fear that led him first to degrade their working environment and then to use infanticide to curb the growth of their population.

Work may be physically and mentally taxing, but that does not make it wrong. What made the situation in Egypt unbearable was not only the slavery, but its extreme harshness. The Egyptian masters were "ruthless" (*perek*, Ex. 1:13, 14), "bitter" (*marar*, Ex. 1:14), and "hard" (*qasheh*, in the sense of "cruel," Ex. 1:14; 6:9). As a result, Israel languished in "misery" and "suffering" (Ex. 3:7) and a "broken spirit" (Ex. 6:9). Work, one of the chief purposes and joys of human existence (Genesis 1:27-31; 2:15) was turned into a misery by the harshness of oppression.

The Work of Midwifery and Mothering (Exodus 1:15-2:10)

In the midst of harsh treatment, the Israelites remained faithful to God's command to be fruitful and multiply (Genesis 1:28). That entailed bearing children, which in turn depended on the work of midwives. In addition to its presence in the Bible, the work of midwifery is well-attested in ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt. Midwives assisted women in childbearing, cut the infant's umbilical cord, washed the baby, and presented the child to the mother and father.

The midwives in this narrative possess a fear of God that led them to disobey the royal order to kill all

of the male children born to the Hebrew women (Ex. 1:15-17). Generally speaking, the “fear of the Lord” (and related expressions) in the Bible refer to a healthy and obedient relationship with the covenant-making God of Israel (Hebrew, *YHWH*). On the other hand, the expression “fear of God” describes one’s possession of a more generally accepted standard of moral conduct that is derived from God’s general revelation in the world and in the human conscience.^[4] This observation prompts the question, “Were these midwives Egyptian or Israelite?” Commentaries take up this question as well as other related concerns in this portion of Exodus. Without being dogmatic, we may suggest that if the midwives were Egyptian, then their refusal to slay newborn boys was the property of decent people in general and not necessarily a tenet of one particular faith. Or perhaps their decency and courage arose from their work. Would those who shepherd new life into birth every day become so aware of the value of life that they could not help but disobey an order to murder?

Moses’ mother, Jochebed (Ex. 6:20), was another woman who faced a seemingly impossible choice and forged a creative solution. One can hardly imagine her relief at secretly and successfully bearing a male child, followed by her pain at having to place him into the river, and to do so in a way that would actually *save* his life. The parallels to Noah’s ark—the Hebrew word for “basket” is used only one other place in the Bible, namely for Noah’s “ark”—let us know that God was acting not only to save one baby boy, or even one nation, but to redeem the whole creation through Moses and Israel. Parallel to his reward to the midwives, God showed kindness to Moses’ mother, Jochebed. She recovered her son and nursed him until he was old enough to be adopted as the son of Pharaoh’s daughter. The godly work of bearing and raising children is well-known to be complex, demanding and praise-worthy (Proverbs 31:10-31). In Exodus, we read nothing of the inner struggles experienced by Jochebed, the unsung heroine. From a narrative point of view, Moses’ life is the main issue. But the Bible later commended both her and Moses’ father for how they put their faith into action (Hebrews 11:23).

Too often the work of bearing and raising children is overlooked. Mothers, especially, often get the message that childrearing is not as important or praiseworthy as other work. Yet when Exodus tells the story of how to follow God, the first thing it has to tell us is the incomparable importance of bearing, raising, protecting and helping children. The first act of courage, in this book filled with courageous deeds, is the courage of a mother, her family and her midwives in saving her child.

God’s Call to Moses (Exodus 2:11-3:22)

Moses was a Hebrew, but was raised in Egypt’s royal family as the grandson of Pharaoh. His revulsion to injustice erupted into a lethal attack on an Egyptian man who he found beating a Hebrew worker. This act came to Pharaoh’s attention, so Moses fled for safety and became a shepherd in Midian, a region several hundred miles east of Egypt on the other side of the Sinai Peninsula. We do not know exactly how long he lived there, but during that time he married and had a son. In addition, two

important things happened. The king in Egypt died, and the Lord heard the cry of his oppressed people and remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Ex. 2:23-25). This act of remembering did not mean that God had forgotten about his people. It signaled that he was about to act on their behalf. [5] For that, he would call Moses.

God's call to Moses came while Moses was at work. The account of how this happened comprises six elements that form a pattern evident in the lives of other leaders and prophets in the Bible. It is therefore instructive for us to examine this call narrative and to consider its implications for us today, especially in the context of our work.

First, God *confronted* Moses and arrested his attention at the scene of the burning bush (Ex. 3:2-5). A brush fire in the semi-desert is nothing exceptional, but Moses was intrigued by the nature of this particular one. Moses heard his name called and responded with the expression, "Here I am." This is a statement of availability, not location. Second, the Lord *introduced* himself as the God of the patriarchs and communicated his intent to rescue his people from Egypt and to bring them into the land he had promised to Abraham (Ex. 3:6-9). Third, God *commissioned* Moses to go to Pharaoh to bring God's people out of Egypt (Ex. 3:10). Fourth, Moses *objected* (Ex. 3:11). Although he had just heard a powerful revelation of who was speaking to him in this moment, his immediate concern was, "Who am I?" In response to this, God *reassured* Moses with a promise of God's own presence (Ex. 3:12a). Finally, God spoke of a *confirming sign* (Ex. 3:12b).

These same elements are present in a number of other call narratives in scripture, for example in the callings of Gideon, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and some of Jesus' disciples. This is not a rigid formula, for many other call narratives in scripture follow a different pattern. But it does suggest that God's call often comes via an extended series of encounters that guide a person in God's way over time.

	Gideon in Judges	The prophet Isaiah	The prophet Jeremiah	The prophet Ezekiel	Jesus' Disciples in Matthew
Confrontation	6:11b-12a	6:1-2	1:4	1:1-28a	28:16-17
Introduction	6:12b-13	6:3-7	1:5a	1:28b-2:2	28:18
Commission	6:14	6:8-10	1:5b	2:3-5	28:19-20a

Objection	6:15	6:11a	1:6	2:6, 8	
Reassurance	6:16	6:11b-13	1:7-8	2:6-7	28:20b
Confirming Sign	6:17-21		1:9-10	2:9-3:2	Possibly the book of Acts

Notice that these callings are *not* primarily to priestly or religious work in a congregation. Gideon was a military leader, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel social critics, and Jesus a king (although not in the traditional sense). In many churches today, the term “call” is limited to religious occupations, but this is not so in scripture, and certainly not in Exodus. Moses himself was not a priest or religious leader (those were Aaron’s and Miriam’s roles), but a statesman and governor. (For more on calling to non-religious work, see [Vocation Overview](http://www.theologyofwork.org) at www.theologyofwork.org.)

God’s Work of Redemption for Israel (Exodus 5:1-6:28)

In the book of Exodus, God is the essential worker. The nature and intent of that divine work set the agenda for Moses’ work and through him, the work of God’s people. God’s initial call to Moses included an explanation of God’s work. This drove Moses to speak in the name of the Lord to Pharaoh saying, “Let my people go” (Ex. 5:1). Pharaoh’s rebuttal was not merely verbal; he oppressed the Israelites even more harshly than before. By the end of this episode, even the Israelites themselves had turned against Moses (Ex. 5:20-21). It is at this crucial point that in response to Moses’ questioning God about the entire enterprise, God clarified the design of his work. What we read here in Exodus 6:2-8 pertains not only to the immediate context of Israel’s oppression in Egypt. It frames an agenda that embraces all of God’s work in the Bible.^[6] It is important for all Christians to be clear about the scope of God’s work, because it helps us to understand what it means to pray for God’s kingdom to come and for his will to be done on earth as it is in heaven (Matthew 6:10). The fulfillment of these intentions is God’s business. To accomplish them, he will involve the full range of his people, not merely those who do “religious” work. Coming to a clearer understanding of God’s work equips us to consider better not only the nature of our work but the manner in which God intends for us to do it.

In order to better appreciate this key text, we will make some brief observations about it and then

suggest how it is relevant to the theology of work. After an initially assuring response to Moses' accusatory question about God's mission (Ex. 5:22-6:1), God frames his more extended response with the words, "I am the Lord" at the beginning and the end (Ex. 6:2, 8). This key phrase demarcates the paragraph and gives the content especially high priority. English readers must be careful to note that this phrase does not communicate *what* God is in terms of a title. It reveals God's own name and therefore speaks to *who* he is. [7] He is the covenant-making, promise-keeping God who appeared to the patriarchs. The work God is about to do for his people is therefore grounded in the intentions that God has expressed to them. Namely, these are to multiply Abraham's descendants, to make his name great, and to bless him so that through Abraham, God would bless all the families of the earth (Genesis 12:2-3).

God's work then appears in four parts. These four redemptive purposes of God reappear in various ways throughout the Old Testament and even give shape to the pinnacle of God's redemptive work in Jesus Christ. First is the work of *deliverance*. "I will free you from the burdens of the Egyptians and deliver you from slavery to them. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment" (Ex. 6:6). Inherent in this work of liberation is the frank truth that the world is a place of manifold oppression. Sometimes we use the word "salvation" to describe this activity of God, but must be careful to avoid understanding it either in terms of rescue from earth to heaven (and certainly not from matter to spirit) or as merely forgiveness of sin. The God of Israel delivered his people by stepping into their world and effecting a change "on the ground," so to speak. Exodus not only shows God's deliverance of Israel from Pharaoh in Egypt, but also sets the stage for the messianic king, Jesus, to *deliver* his people from their sins and conquer the devil, the ultimate evil tyrant (Matthew 1:21, 12:28).

Second, the Lord will form a *godly community*. "I will take you as my people, and I will be your God" (Ex. 6:7a). God did not deliver his people so they could live however they pleased, nor did he deliver them as isolated individuals. He intended to create a qualitatively different kind of community in which his people would live with him and each other in covenantal faithfulness. Every nation in ancient times had their "gods," but Israel's identity as God's people entailed a lifestyle of obedience to all of God's decrees, commands, and laws (Deuteronomy 26:17-18). As these values and actions would saturate their dealings with God and each other (and even those outside the covenant), Israel would increasingly demonstrate what it genuinely means to be God's people. Again, this forms the background for Jesus, who would build his "church," not as a physical structure of brick or stone but as a new *community* with disciples from all nations (Matthew 16:18, 28:19).

Third, the Lord will create an ongoing *relationship* between himself and his people. "You shall know that I am the Lord your God, who has freed you from the burdens of the Egyptians" (Ex. 6:7b). All of the other statements of God's purpose begin with the word "I" except this one. Here, the focus is on "you." God intends *his people* to have a certain experience of their relationship with God who graciously rescued them. To us, "knowledge" seems practically equivalent with information. The biblical concept

of knowledge embraces this notion but also includes interpersonal experience of knowing others. To say that God did not make himself “known” as “Lord” to Abraham does not mean that Abraham was unaware of the divine name “YHWH” (Genesis 13:4, 21:33). It means that Abraham and family had not yet personally experienced the significance of this name as descriptive of their promise-keeping God who would fight on behalf of his people to deliver them from slavery on a national scale. [8] Ultimately, this is taken up by Jesus, whose name “Immanuel” means God “with us” in *relationship* (Matthew 1:23).

Fourth, God intends for his people to experience the *good life*. “I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; I will give it to you for a possession” (Ex. 6:8). God promised to give Abraham the land of Canaan, but it is not accurate to simply equate this “land” with our concept of a “region.” It is a land of promise and provision. The regular and positive description of it as “flowing with milk and honey” highlights its symbolic nature as a place in which to live with God and God’s people in ideal conditions, something we understand as the “abundant life.” [9] Here again we see that God’s work of salvation is a setting to right of his entire creation—physical environment, people, culture, economics, everything. This is also the mission of Jesus as he initiates the kingdom of God coming to earth, where the meek inherit the earth (the land) and experience eternal life (Matthew 5:5; John 17:3). [10] This comes to completion in the New Jerusalem of Revelation 21 and 22. Exodus thus sets the path for the entirety of the Bible that follows.

Consider how our work today may express these four redemptive purposes. First, God’s will is to *deliver* people from oppression and the harmful conditions of life. Some of that work rescues people from physical dangers; other work focuses on the alleviation of psychological and emotional trauma. The work of healing touches people one by one; those who forge political solutions to our needs can bless whole societies and classes of people. Workers in law enforcement and in the judicial system should aim to restrain and punish those who do evil, to protect people, and to care for victims. Given the pervasive extent of oppression in the world, there will always be manifold opportunities and means to work for deliverance.

The second and third purposes (*community* and *relationship*) are closely related to each other. Godly work that promotes peace and true harmony in heaven will enhance mercy and justice on earth. This is the gist of Paul’s address to the Corinthians: through Christ, God has reconciled us to himself and thus given us the message and ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:16-20). Christians have experienced this reconciliation and therefore have motive and means to do this kind of work. The work of evangelism and spiritual development honors one dimension of the area; the work of peace and justice honors the interpersonal dimension. In essence, the two are inseparable and those who work in these fields do well to remember the holistic nature of what God is doing. Jesus taught that because we *are* the light of the world, we should let our light shine before others (Matthew 5:14-16).

Building community and relationships can be the *object* of our job, as in the case of community

organizers, youth workers, social directors, event planners, social media workers, parents and family members, and many others. But they can also be *elements* of our job, whatever our occupation. When we welcome and assist new workers, ask and listen as others talk about matters of significance, take the trouble to meet someone in person, send a note of encouragement, share a memorable photo, bring good food to share, include someone in a conversation, or myriad other acts of camaraderie, we are fulfilling these two purposes of work, day by day.

Finally, godly work promotes the *good life*. God led his people *out* of Egypt in order to bring them *in* to the Promised Land where they could settle, live and develop. Yet, what Israel experienced there was far less than God's ideal. Likewise, what Christians experience in the world is not ideal either. The promise of entering God's rest is still open (Hebrews 4:1). We still wait for a new heaven and a new earth. But many of the laws of the covenant that God gave through Moses have to do with ethical treatment of one another. It is vitally important, then, that God's blessing be worked out in the way we live and work with one another. Seen from the negative side, how can we reasonably expect all families of the earth to experience God's blessing through us (the people of Abraham through faith in Christ), if we ourselves ignore God's instructions about how to live and do our work? As Christopher Wright has noted, "The people of God in both testaments are called to be a light to the nations. But there can be no light to the nations that is not shining already in transformed lives of a holy people." [11] It thus becomes clear that the kind of "good life" in view here has nothing to do with unbridled selfish prosperity or conspicuous consumption, for it embraces the wide spectrum of life as God intends it to be: full of love, justice, and mercy.

Moses and Aaron Announce God's Judgment to Pharaoh (Exodus 7:1-12:51)

God began the first step—deliverance—by sending Moses and Aaron to tell Pharaoh "to let the Israelites go out of his land" (Ex. 7:2). For this task, God made use of Aaron's natural skill in public speaking (4:14, 7:1). He also equipped Aaron with skill surpassing that of the high officials of Egypt (7:10-12). This reminds us that God's mission requires both word and action.

Pharaoh refused to listen to God's demand, through Moses, to release Israel from slavery. In turn, Moses announced God's judgment to Pharaoh through an increasingly severe series of ecological disasters (7:17-10:29). These disasters caused personal misery. More significantly, they drastically impaired the productive capacity of Egypt's land and people. Disease caused livestock to die (9:6). Crops failed and forests were ruined (9:25). Pests invaded multiple ecosystems (8:6, 24; 10:13-15). In Exodus, ecological disaster is the retribution of God against the tyranny and oppression of Pharaoh. In the modern world, political oppression continues to go hand-in-hand with ecological disaster. We would be fools to think we can assume Moses' authority and declare God's judgment in any of these. But we can see that when economics, politics, culture and society are in need of redemption, so is the

environment.

Each of these warnings-in-action convinced Pharaoh to release Israel, but as each passed, he reneged. Finally, God brought on the disaster of slaying every first-born son among the people and animals of the Egyptians (12:29-30). Slavery exacts a grievous toll on slave owners as their hearts are inevitably “hardened,” as Pharaoh’s was (11:10). Pharaoh then accepted God’s demand to let Israel go free. The departing Israelites “plundered” the Egyptians’ jewelry, silver, gold and clothing (12:35-36). This reversed the effects of slavery, which was the legalized plunder of exploited workers. When God liberates people, he restores their right to labor for fruits they themselves can enjoy (Isaiah 65:21-22). Work, and the conditions under which it is performed, is a matter of the highest concern to God.

Israel at the Red Sea and on the Way to Sinai (Exodus 13:17-18:27)

The foundational expression of God’s work came to dramatic fruition when God decisively led his people through the Red Sea, releasing them from Egypt’s tyrannical hold. The God who had separated the waters of chaos and created dry land, the God who had brought Noah’s family through the deluge to dry land, “divided” the waters of the Red Sea and led Israel across on “dry ground” (Ex. 14:21-22). Israel’s journey from Egypt to Sinai is thus the continuation of the story of God’s creation and redemption. Moses, Aaron and others work hard, yet God is the real worker.

The Work of Justice Among the People of Israel (Exodus 18:1-27)

While on the journey from Egypt to Sinai, Moses reconnected with his father-in-law, Jethro. This former outsider to the Israelites offered much-needed counsel to Moses concerning justice in the community. God’s work of redemption *for* his people was expanded into the work of justice *among* his people. Israel had already experienced unjust treatment at the hand of the Egyptian task masters. Out on their own, they rightly sought for *God’s* answers to their own disputes. Walter Brueggemann has observed that biblical faith is not just about telling the story of what God has done. It is also “about the hard, sustained work of nurturing and practicing the daily passion of healing and restoring, and the daily rejection of dishonest gain.”^[12]

One of the first things we learned earlier about Moses was his desire to mediate between those embroiled in a dispute. Initially, when Moses tried to intervene, he was rebuked with the words, “Who made you a ruler and a judge over us?” (Ex. 2:14). In the current episode, we see just the opposite. Moses is in such demand as the ruler-judge that a multitude of people in need of his decisions gathered around him “from morning until evening” (Ex. 18:14; see also Deuteronomy 1:9-18). Moses’ work apparently has two aspects. First, he rendered legal decisions for people in dispute. Second, he taught God’s statutes and instructions for those seeking moral and religious guidance.^[13] Jethro observed

that Moses was the sole agent in this noble work, but deemed the entire process to be unsustainable. “What you are doing is not good” (Ex. 18:17). Furthermore, it was detrimental to Moses and unsatisfying for the people he was trying to help. Jethro’s solution was to let Moses continue doing what he was uniquely qualified to do as God’s representative: intercede with God for the people, instruct them, and decide the difficult cases. All of the other cases were to be delegated to subordinate judges who would serve in a four-tiered system of judicial administration.

The qualification of these judges is the key to the wisdom of the plan, for they were not selected according to the tribal divisions of the people or their religious maturity. They must meet four qualifications (Ex. 18:21). First, they must be capable. The Hebrew expression “men of *hayil*” connotes ability, leadership, management, resourcefulness and due respect.^[14] Second, they must “fear God.” As with the midwives in chapter 2, this is probably not specifically a religious quality. It describes people who have a clear understanding of commonly recognized morality that stretches across cultural and religious boundaries. Third, they must be “men of truth.” Because truth is an abstract concept as well as a way of acting, these people must have a public track record of truthful character as well as conduct. Finally, they must be haters of unjust gain. They must know how and why corruption occurs, despise the practice of bribery and all kinds of subversion, and actively guard the judicial process from these infections.

Delegation is essential to the work of leadership. Though Moses was *uniquely* gifted as a prophet, statesman and judge, he was not *infinitely* gifted. Anyone who imagines that only he or she is capable of doing God’s work well has forgotten what it means to be human. Therefore, the gift of leadership is ultimately the gift of giving away power appropriately. The leader, like Moses, must discern the qualities needed, train those who are to receive authority, and develop means to hold them accountable. The leader also needs to be held accountable. Jethro performed this task in Moses’ case, and the passage is remarkably frank in showing how even the greatest of all the Old Testament prophets had to be confronted by someone with the power to hold him accountable. Wise, decisive, compassionate leadership is a gift from God that every human community needs. Yet Exodus shows us that it is not so much a matter of a gifted leader assuming authority over people, as it is God’s process for a community to develop structures of leadership in which gifted people can succeed. Delegation is the only way to increase the capacity of an institution or community, as well as the way to develop future leaders.

The fact that Moses accepted this counsel so quickly and thoroughly may be evidence of how personally desperate he was. But on a wider scale, we also can see that Moses (the Hebrew and heir of the Abrahamic promises) was completely open to God’s wisdom mediated to him through a Midianite priest. This observation may encourage Christians to receive and respect input from a wide range of traditions and religions, notably in matters of work. Doing so is not necessarily a mark of disloyalty to Christ nor does it expose a lack of confidence in our own faith. It is not an improper concession to religious pluralism. On the contrary, it may even be a poor witness to produce biblical quotes of wisdom too

frequently, for in so doing, outsiders may perceive us as narrow and possibly insecure. Christians do well to be discerning about the specifics of the counsel we adopt, whether it comes from within or without. But in the final analysis, we are confident that “all truth is God’s truth.” [15]

Israel at Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:1-40:38)

At Mount Sinai, Moses received the Ten Commandments from the Lord. As the NIV Study Bible puts it, “The Ten Commandments are the central stipulations of God’s covenant with Israel made at Sinai. It is almost impossible to exaggerate their effect on subsequent history. They constitute the basis of the moral principles found throughout the Western world and summarize what the one true God expects of his people in terms of faith, worship and conduct.” [16] As we will see, the role of the Israelite law for Christians is the subject of a great deal of controversy. For these reasons, we will be attentive to what the text of Exodus actually says, for this is what we hold in common. At the same time, we hope to be aware and respectful of the variety of ways that Christians may wish to draw lessons from this part of the Bible.

The Meaning of Law in Exodus (Exodus 19:1-24:18)

We begin by recognizing that Exodus is an integral part of the whole of Scripture, not a stand-alone legal statute. Christopher Wright has written,

The common opinion that the Bible is a moral code book for Christians falls far short, of course, of the full reality of what the Bible is and does. The Bible is essentially the story of God, the earth and humanity; it is the story of what has gone wrong, what God has done to put it right, and what the future holds under the sovereign plan of God. Nevertheless, within that grand narrative, moral teaching does have a vital place. The Bible’s story is the story of the mission of God. The Bible’s demand is for the appropriate response from human beings. God’s mission calls for and includes human response. And our mission certainly includes the ethical dimension of that response.

[17]

The English word “law” is a traditional, yet inaccurate rendering of the key Hebrew word, *Torah*. Because this term is so central to the entire discussion at hand, it will help us to clarify how this Hebrew word actually works in the Bible. The word *Torah* appears once in Genesis in the sense of instructions from God that Abraham followed (Genesis 26:6). It can refer to instructions from one human to another (Psalm 78:1). But as something from God, the word *Torah* throughout the

Pentateuch and the rest of the Old Testament designates a standard of conduct for God's people pertaining to ceremonial matters of formal worship as well as statutes for civil and social conduct.

[18] The biblical notion of Torah conveys the sense of "divinely authoritative instruction." This concept is far from our modern ideas of law as a body of codes crafted and enacted by legislators or "natural" laws. To highlight the rich and instructive nature of law in Exodus, we shall sometimes refer to it as Torah with no attempt at translation.

In Exodus, it is very clear that Torah in the sense of a set of specific instructions is part of the covenant and not the other way around. In other words, the covenant as a whole describes the relationship that God has established between himself and his people by virtue of his act of deliverance on their behalf (Ex. 20:2). As the people's covenantal king, God then specifies how he desires Israel to worship and behave. Israel's pledge to obey is a *response* to God's gift of the covenant (Ex. 24:7). This is significant for our understanding of the theology of work. The way we discern God's will for our behavior at work and the way we put that into practice in the workplace are enveloped by the relationship that God has established with us. In Christian terms, we love God because he first loved us and we demonstrate that love in how we treat others (1 John 4:19-21). The categorical nature of God's command for us to love our neighbors means that God intends for us to apply it everywhere, regardless of whether we find ourselves in a church, café, home, civic venue or place of work.

The Role of the Law for Christians (Exodus 20:1-24:18)

It can be a challenge for a Christian to draw a point from a verse in the book of Exodus or especially Leviticus and then suggest how that lesson should be applied today. Anyone who tries this should be prepared for the comeback, "Sure, but the Bible also permits slavery and says we can't eat bacon or shrimp! Plus, I don't think God really cares if my clothes are a cotton-polyester blend" (Ex. 21:2-11; Leviticus 11:7, 12, and 19:19, respectively). Since this kind of thing happens even within Christian circles, we should not be surprised to find difficulties when applying the Bible to the subject of work in the public sphere. How are we to know what applies today and what doesn't? How do we avoid the charge of inconsistency in our handling of the Bible? More importantly, how do we let God's word truly transform us in every area of life? The diversity of laws in Exodus and the Pentateuch presents one type of challenge. Another comes from the variety of ways that Christians understand and apply Torah and the Old Testament in relationship to Christ and the New Testament. Still, the issue of Torah in Christianity is crucial and must be addressed in order for us to glean anything about what this part of the Bible says concerning our work. The following brief treatment aims to be helpful without being overly narrow.

The New Testament's relationship to the Law is complex. It includes both Jesus' saying that "Not one

letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law” (Matthew 5:15) and Paul’s statement that “We are discharged from the law...not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit” (Romans 7:6). These are not two opposing statements, but two ways of saying a common reality, that Torah continues to reveal God’s gift of justice, wisdom and inner transformation to those he has brought to new life in Christ. God gave the Torah as an expression of his holy nature and as a consequence of his great deliverance. Reading the Torah makes us aware of our inherent sinfulness and of our need for a remedy in order for us to live at peace with God and one another. God expects his people to obey his instructions by applying them to real issues of life both great and small. The specific nature of some laws does not mean God is an unrealistic perfectionist. These laws help us to understand that no issue we face is too small or insignificant for God. Even so, Torah is not just about outward behavior, for it addresses matters of the heart such as coveting (Ex. 20:17). Later, Jesus would condemn not just murder and adultery, but the roots of anger and lust as well (Matthew 5:22, 28).

However, obeying Torah by applying it to the real issues of life today does not equate to repeating the actions that Israel performed thousands of years ago. Already in the Old Testament we see hints that some parts of the law were not intended to be permanent. The Tabernacle certainly was not a permanent structure (Leviticus 1:50-51) and even the Temple perished at the hands of Israel’s enemies (2 Kings 25:15-17). Yet Jesus spoke of his own sacrificial death and resurrection when he said he would raise the destroyed “Temple” in three days (John 2:19). In some important sense, he embodied all that the Temple, its priesthood, and its activities stood for. Jesus’ declaration about food, that it is not what goes into a person that makes them unclean, meant that the specific food laws of the Mosaic Covenant were no longer in force (Mark 7:19).^[19] Moreover, in the New Testament, the people of God live in various countries and cultures around the world where they have no legal authority to apply the sanctions of the Torah. The Apostles considered such issues and, under the Holy Spirit’s guidance, decided that the particulars of the Jewish law did not in general apply to Gentile Christians (Acts 15:28-29).

When asked about which commandments were most important, Jesus’ answer was not controversial in light of the theology of his time. “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength” and “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:30-31).^[20]

Much in the New Testament confirms the Torah, not only in its negative commands against adultery, murder, theft and coveting, but also in its positive command to love one another (Romans 13:8-10; Galatians 5:14). According to Timothy Keller, “The coming of Christ changed how we worship, but not how we live.”^[21] This is not surprising, given that in the New Covenant, God said he would put his law within his people and write it on their hearts (Jeremiah 31:33; Luke 22:20). Israel’s faithfulness to the laws of Mosaic Covenant depended on their determination to obey them. In the end, only Jesus could accomplish this. On the other hand, New Covenant believers do not work that way. According to Paul,

“We serve in the new way of the Spirit” (Romans 7:6, NIV).

For our purposes in considering the theology of work, the previous explanation suggests several points that may help us to understand and apply the laws in Exodus that relate to the workplace. The specific laws dealing with proper treatment of workers, animals, and property express abiding values of God’s own nature. They are to be taken seriously but not slavishly. On the one hand, items in the Ten Commandments are worded in general terms and may be applied freely in varied contexts. On the other hand, particular laws about servants, livestock and personal injuries exemplify applications in the specific historical and social context of ancient Israel, especially in areas that were controversial at the time. These laws are illustrative of right behavior but do not exhaust every possible application. Christians honor God and his law not only by regulating our behavior, but also by allowing the Holy Spirit to transform our attitudes, motives and desires (Romans 12:1-2). To do anything less would amount to side-stepping the work and will of our Lord and Savior. Christians may always seek how love may guide our policies and behaviors.

Instructions about Work (Exodus 20:1-17 and 21:1-23:9)

Israel’s “Book of the Covenant” (Ex. 24:7) included the Ten Commandments, also known as the Decalogue (literally, the “words,” Ex. 20:1-17), and the ordinances of Ex. 21:1-23:19. The Ten Commandments are worded as general commands either to do or not do something. The ordinances are a collection of case laws, applying the values of the Decalogue in specific situations using an “if...then” format. These laws fit the social and economic world of ancient Israel. They are not an exhaustive legal code, but they function as exemplars, serving to curb the worst excesses, and setting legal precedent for handling difficult cases. [\[22\]](#)

The Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17)

The Ten Commandments are the supreme expression of God’s will in the Old Testament and merit our close attention. They are to be thought of not as the ten most important commands among hundreds of others, but as a digest of the entire Torah. The foundation of all Torah rests in the Ten Commandments, and somewhere within them we should be able to find *all* the Law. Jesus expressed the essential unity of the Ten Commandments with the rest of the Law when he summarized the Law in the famous words, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Matthew 22:37-40). *All* the law, as well as the prophets, is indicated whenever the Ten Commandments are expressed.

The essential unity of the Ten Commandments with the rest of the Law, and their continuity with the

New Testament, invites us to apply them to today's work broadly in light of the rest of the scripture. That is, when applying the Ten Commandments, we will take into account related passages of scripture in both the Old and New Testaments.

“You shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3)

The first commandment reminds us that everything in the Torah flows from the love we have for God, which in turn is a response to the love he has for us. This love was demonstrated by God's deliverance of Israel “out of the house of slavery” in Egypt (Ex. 20:2). Nothing else in life should concern us more than our desire to love and be loved by God. If we *do* have some other concern stronger to us than our love for God, it is not so much that we are breaking God's rules, but that we are not really in relationship with God. The other concern—be it money, power, security, recognition, sex, or anything else—has become our god. This god will have its own commandments at odds with God's, and we will inevitably violate the Torah as we comply with this god's requirements. Observing the Ten Commandments is only conceivable for those who start by having no other god than God.

In the realm of work, this means that we are not to let work or its requirements and fruits displace God as our most important concern in life. “Never allow anyone or anything to threaten God's central place in your life,” as David Gill puts it.^[23] Because many people work primarily to make money, an inordinate desire for money is probably the most common work-related danger to the first commandment. Jesus warned of exactly this danger. “No one can serve two masters.... You cannot serve God and wealth” (Matthew 6:24). But almost anything related to work can become twisted in our desires to the point that it interferes with our love for God. How many careers come to a tragic end because the *means* to accomplish things for the love of God, such as political power, financial sustainability, commitment to the job, status among peers, or superior performance, become ends in themselves? When, for example, recognition on the job becomes more important than character on the job, is it not a sign that reputation is displacing the love of God as the ultimate concern?

A practical touchstone is to ask whether our love of God is shown by the way we treat people on the job. “Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also” (1 John 4:20-21). If we put our individual concerns ahead of our concern for the people we work with, for, and among, we have made our individual concerns our god. In particular, if we treat other people as things to be manipulated, obstacles to overcome, instruments to obtain what we want, or simply neutral objects in our field of view, we demonstrate that we do not love God with all our heart, soul and mind.

In this context, we can begin to list some work-related actions that have a high potential to interfere

with our love for God. Doing work that violates our conscience. Working in an organization where we have to harm others to succeed. Working such long hours that we have little time to pray, worship, rest and otherwise deepen our relationship with God. Working among people who demoralize us or seduce us away from our love for God. Working where alcohol, drug abuse, violence, sexual harassment, corruption, disrespect, racism or other inhumane treatment mar the image of God in us and the people we encounter in our work. If we can find ways to avoid these dangers at work—even if it means finding a new job—it would be wise to do so. If that is not possible, we can at least be aware that we need help and support to maintain our love of God in the face of our work.

“You shall not make for yourself an idol” (Exodus 20:4)

The second commandment raises the issue of idolatry. Idols are gods of our own creation, gods that have nothing to them that did not originate with us, gods that we feel we control. In ancient times, idolatry often took the form of worshiping physical objects. But the issue is really one of trust and devotion. On what do we ultimately pin our hope of well-being and success? Anything that is not capable of fulfilling our hope—that is, anything other than God—is an idol, whether or not it is a physical object. The story of a family forging an idol with the intent to manipulate God, and the disastrous personal, social and economic consequences that follow, are memorably told in Judges, chapters 17-21.

In the world of work, it is common to speak of money, fame and power as potential idols, and rightly so. They are not idolatrous, *per se*, and in fact may be necessary for us to accomplish our roles in God’s creative and redemptive work in the world. Yet when we imagine that we have ultimate control over them or that by achieving them our safety and prosperity will be secured, we have begun to fall into idolatry. The same may occur with virtually every other element of success, including preparation, hard work, creativity, risk, wealth and other resources, and favorable circumstances. As workers, we have to recognize how important these are. As God’s people, we must recognize when we begin to idolize them. By God’s grace, we can overcome the temptation to worship these good things in their own right. The development of genuinely godly wisdom and skill for any task is “*so that your trust may be in the Lord*” (Proverbs 22:19).

The distinctive element of idolatry is the human-made nature of the idol. At work, the danger of idolatry arises when we mistake our power, knowledge and opinions for reality. For example, when a business promises a delivery date for a new product, without good evidence it can meet that date, and without informing the customer of the risks, the company has put its faith in a myth of its own making. Or when employers use their own prejudices and projections to draw unsubstantiated conclusions about employees—thinking something like, “a person like her would never be able to succeed in this job”—have they not begun “a work of delusion,” to use Jeremiah’s words (Jeremiah 10:15)? In the

strictest sense, these may not be violations of the second commandment, since they are offenses against people rather than against God himself. But when we remember that Jesus said, “As you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Matthew 25:40), we might let the second commandment guide us never to let our own devices and desires become the source of our values at work.

“You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God” (Exodus 20:7)

The third commandment literally prohibits God’s people from making “wrongful use” of the name of God. This need not be restricted to the name, “YHWH” (Ex. 3:15), but includes “God,” “Jesus,” “Christ,” and so forth. But what is wrongful use? It includes, of course, disrespectful use in cursing, slandering and blaspheming. But more significantly it includes falsely attributing human designs to God. This prohibits us from claiming God’s authority for our own actions and decisions. Regrettably, some Christians seem to believe that following God at work consists primarily of speaking for God on the basis of their individual understanding, rather than working respectfully with others or taking responsibility for their actions. “It is God’s will that...,” or “God is punishing you for...,” are very dangerous things to say, and almost never valid when spoken by an individual without the discernment of the community of faith (1 Thessalonians 5:20-21). In this light, perhaps the traditional Jewish reticence to utter even the English translation “God”—let alone the divine name itself—demonstrates a wisdom Christians often lack. If we were a little more careful about bandying the word “God” about, perhaps we would be more judicious in claiming to know God’s will, especially as it applies to other people.

The third commandment also reminds us that respecting human names is important to God. The Good Shepherd “calls his own sheep by name” (John 10:3) while warning us that if you call another person, “you fool,” then “you will be liable to the hell of fire” (Matthew 5:22). Keeping this in mind, we shouldn’t make wrongful use of other people’s names or call them by disrespectful epithets. We use people’s names wrongfully when we use them to curse, humiliate, oppress, exclude, and defraud. We use people’s names well when we use them to encourage, thank, create solidarity, and welcome. Simply to learn and say someone’s name is a blessing, especially if he or she is often treated as nameless, invisible, or insignificant. Do you know the name of the person who empties your trash can, answers your customer service call, or drives your bus? If these examples do not concern the very name of the Lord, they do concern the name of those made in his image.

Remember the sabbath day and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor (Exodus

20:8-11)

The issue of the sabbath is complex, not only in the book of Exodus and the Old Testament, but also in Christian theology and practice. The first part of the command calls for ceasing labor one day in seven. The other references in Exodus to the sabbath are in chapter 16 (about gathering manna), Ex. 23:10-12 (the seventh year and the goal of weekly rest), Ex. 31:12-17 (penalty for violation), Ex. 34:21 and Ex. 35:1-3. In the context of the ancient world, the sabbath was unique to Israel. On the one hand, this was an incomparable gift to the people of Israel. No other ancient people had the privilege of resting one day in seven. On the other hand, it required an extraordinary trust in God's provision. Six days of work had to be enough to plant crops, gather the harvest, carry water, spin cloth and draw sustenance from creation. While Israel rested one day every week, the encircling nations continued to forge swords, fletch arrows, and train soldiers. Israel had to trust God not to let a day of rest lead to economic and military catastrophe.

We face the same issue of trust in God's provision today. If we heed God's commandment to observe God's own cycle of work and rest, will we be able to compete in the modern economy? Does it take seven days of work to hold a job (or two or three jobs), clean the house, prepare the meals, mow the lawn, wash the car, pay the bills, finish the school work, and shop for the clothes, or can we trust God to provide for us even if we take a day off during the course of every week? Can we take time to worship God, to pray and to gather with others for study and encouragement, and, if we do, will it make us more or less productive overall? The fourth commandment does not explain how God will make it all work out for us. It simply tells us to rest one day every seven.

Christians have translated the day of rest to the Lord's Day (Sunday, the day of Christ's resurrection), but the essence of the sabbath is not choosing one particular day of the week over another (Romans 14:5-6). The polarity that actually undergirds the sabbath is *work* and *rest*. Both work and rest are included in the fourth commandment. The six days of work are as much a part of the commandment as the one day of rest. Although many Christians are in danger of allowing work to squeeze the time set aside for rest, others are in danger of the opposite, of shirking work and trying to live a life of leisure and dissipation. This is even worse than neglecting the sabbath, for "whoever does not provide for relatives, and especially for family members, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever" (1 Timothy 5:8). What we need is a proper rhythm of work and rest, which together are good for us, our family, workers and guests. The rhythm may or may not include 24 continuous hours of rest falling on Sunday (or Saturday). The proportions may change due to temporary necessities (the modern equivalent of pulling an ox out of the ditch on the sabbath, see Luke 14:5) or the changing needs of the seasons of life.

If overwork is our main danger, we need to find a way to honor the fourth commandment without instituting a false, new legalism pitting the spiritual (worship on Sunday worship) against the secular

(work on Monday through Saturday). If avoiding work is our danger, we need to learn how to find joy and meaning in working as a service to God and our neighbors (Ephesians 4:28). CONTENT NOT YET AVAILABLE: A deeper consideration of both work and rest, with practical applications in a variety of situations, is given in **Rest and Work* at www.theologyofwork.org.

“Honor your father and your mother” (Exodus 20:12)

There are many ways to honor—or dishonor—your father and mother. In Jesus’ day, the Pharisees wanted to restrict this to speaking well of them. But Jesus pointed out that obeying this commandment requires working to provide for your parents (Mark 7:9-13). We honor people by working for their good.

For many people, good relationships with parents are one of the joys of life. Loving service to them is a delight, and obeying this commandment is easy. But we are put to the test by this commandment when we find it burdensome to work on behalf of our parents. We may have been ill-treated or neglected by them. They may be controlling and meddlesome. Being around them may undermine our sense of self, our commitment to our spouses (including our responsibilities under the third commandment), even our relationship with God. Even if we have good relationships with our parents, there may come a time when caring for them is a major burden simply because of the time and work it takes. If aging or dementia begins to rob them of their memory, capabilities, and good nature, caring for them can become a deep sorrow.

Yet the fifth commandment comes with a promise, “that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.” Somehow, honoring our father and mother in such practical ways has the practical benefit of giving us longer (perhaps in the sense of more fulfilling) life in God’s kingdom. We are not told how this will occur, but we are told to expect it, and to do that we must trust God (see the [first commandment](#)).

Because this is a command to work for the benefit of parents, it is inherently a workplace command. The place of work may be where we earn money to support them, or it may be in the place where we assist them in the tasks of daily life. Both are work. When we take a job because it allows us to live near them, or send money to them, or make use of the values and gifts they developed in us, or accomplish things they taught us are important, we are honoring them. When we *limit* our careers so that we can be present with them, clean and cook for them, bathe and embrace them, take them to the places they love, or diminish their fears, we are honoring them.

In our workplaces, we can help other people fulfill the fifth commandment, as well as obeying it ourselves. We can remember that employees, customers, co-workers, bosses, suppliers and others also have families, and then can adjust our expectations to support them in honoring their families. When others share or complain about their struggles with parents, we can listen to them compassionately,

support them practically (say by offering to take a shift so they can be with their parents), or perhaps offer a godly perspective for them to consider.

“You shall not murder” (Exodus 20:13)

Sadly, the sixth commandment has an all-too-practical application in the modern workplace, where 10 percent of all job-related fatalities (in the United States) are homicides. [24] However, admonishing readers of this article, “Don’t murder anyone at work,” isn’t likely to change this statistic much.

But murder isn’t the only form of workplace violence, just the most extreme. A more practical course arises when we remember that Jesus said even anger is a violation of the sixth commandment (Matthew 5:21-22). As Paul noted, we may not be able to prevent the feeling of anger, but we can learn how to cope with our anger. “Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger” (Ephesians 4:26). The most significant implication of the sixth commandment for work then, may be, “If you get angry at work, get help in anger management.” Many employers, churches, state and local governments, and non-profit organization offer classes and counseling in anger management, and availing yourself of these may be a highly effective way of obeying the sixth commandment.

Murder is the intentional killing of a person, but the case law that stems from the sixth commandment shows that we also have the duty to prevent unintended deaths. A particularly graphic case is when an ox (a work animal) gores a man or woman to death (Ex. 21:28-29). If the event was predictable, the ox’s owner is to be treated as a murderer. In other words, owners/managers are responsible for ensuring workplace safety within reason. This principle is well-established in law in most countries, and workplace safety is the subject of significant government policing, industry self-regulation, and organizational policy and practice. Yet workplaces of all kinds continue to require or allow workers to work in needlessly unsafe conditions. Christians who have any role in setting the conditions of work, supervising workers, or modeling workplace practices are reminded by the sixth commandment that safe working conditions are among their highest responsibilities in the world of work.

“You shall not commit adultery” (Exodus 20:14)

The workplace is one of the most common settings for adultery, not necessarily because adultery occurs in the workplace itself, but because it arises from the conditions of work and relationships with co-workers. The first application to the workplace, then, is literal. Married people should not have sex with people other than their spouses at, in, or because of their work. Obviously this rules out sex professions such as prostitution, pornography and sex surrogacy, at least in most cases, to the degree workers have a choice. But any kind of work that erodes the bonds of marriage infringes the seventh commandment. There are many ways this can occur. Work that encourages strong emotional bonds

among co-workers without adequately supporting their commitments to their spouses, as can happen in hospitals, entrepreneurial ventures, academic institutions and churches, among other places. Working conditions that bring people into close physical contact for extended periods or that fail to encourage reasonable limits to off-hours encounters, as could happen on extended field assignments. Work that subjects people to sexual harassment and pressure to have sex with those holding power over them. Work that inflates people's egos or exposes them to adulation, as could occur with celebrities, star athletes, business titans, high-ranking government officials and the super-rich. Work that demands so much time away (physically, mentally or emotionally) that it frays the bonds between spouses. All of these may come into tension with the seventh commandment. Some people may find it wise to avoid jobs entailing such conditions. Others may feel a call, or a desire, or a necessity to work in jobs with these pressures, in which case they would do well to develop specific systems and behaviors to ameliorate the risks and to find people who will hold them accountable in this regard.

In a broader sense, the seriousness of the seventh commandment arises not so much because adultery is illicit sex, as because it breaks a covenant ordained by God. God created husband and wife to become "one flesh" (Genesis 2:24), and Jesus' commentary on the seventh commandment highlights God's role in the marriage covenant. "What God has joined together, let no one separate" (Matthew 19:6). To commit adultery, therefore, is not only to have sex with someone you shouldn't, but also to break a covenant with the Lord God. In fact, the Old Testament frequently uses the word "adultery," and the imagery surrounding it, to refer not to sexual sin, but to idolatry. The Prophets often refer to Israel's faithlessness to its covenant to worship God alone as "adultery" or "whoring," as in Isaiah 57:3, Jeremiah 3:8, Ezekiel, 16:38, and Hosea 2:2, among many others. Therefore any breaking of faith with the God of Israel is figuratively adultery, whether it involves illicit sex or not. This use of the term "adultery" unites the first, second and seventh commandments, and reminds us that the Ten Commandments are expressions of a single covenant with God, rather than some kind of top ten list of rules.

Therefore, work that requires or leads us into idolatry or worshipping other gods is to be avoided. It's hard to imagine how a Christian could work as a tarot reader, a maker of idolatrous art or music, or a publisher of blasphemous books. Christian actors may find it difficult to perform profane, irreligious or spiritually demoralizing roles. Everything we do in life, including work, tends in some degree either to enhance or diminish our relationship with God; over a lifetime, the constant stress of work that diminishes us spiritually may prove devastating. It's a factor we would do well to include in our career decisions, to the degree we have choices.

The distinctive aspect of covenants violated by adultery is that they are covenants with God. But isn't every promise or agreement made by a Christian implicitly a covenant with God? Paul exhorts us, "Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus" (Colossians 3:17). Contracts, promises and agreements are surely things we do in word or deed, or both. If we do them all

in the name of the Lord Jesus, it cannot be that some promises must be honored because they are covenants with God, while others may be broken because they are merely human. We are to honor all our agreements, and to avoid inducing others to break theirs. Whether this is contained in Exodus 20:14 itself, or expounded in the Old and New Testament teachings that arise from it, “Keep your promises, and help others keep theirs,” may serve as a fine derivation of the seventh commandment in the world of work.

“You shall not steal” (Exodus 20:15)

The eighth commandment is another that takes work as its primary subject. Stealing is a violation of proper work because it dispossesses the victim of the fruits of his or her labor. It is also a violation of the commandment to labor six days a week, since in most cases stealing is intended as a shortcut around honest labor, which shows again the interrelation of the Ten Commandments. So we may take it as the word of God that we are not to steal from those we work for, with or among.

Stealing occurs in many forms besides robbing someone. Any time we acquire something of value from its rightful owner without consent, we are engaging in theft. Misappropriating resources or funds for personal use is stealing. Using deception to make sales, gain market share or raise prices is stealing because the deception means that whatever the buyer consents to is not the actual situation. (See the section on “Puffery/Exaggeration” in *Truth and Deception* at www.theologyofwork.org for more on this topic.) Likewise, profiting by taking advantage of people’s fears, vulnerabilities, powerlessness or desperation is a form of stealing because their consent is not truly voluntary. Violating patents, copyrights and other intellectual property laws is stealing because it deprives the owner of an ability to profit from their creation under the terms of civil law.

Regrettably, many jobs seem to include an element of taking advantage of others’ ignorance or lack of alternatives to force them into transactions they otherwise wouldn’t agree to. Companies, governments, individuals, unions and other players may use their power to coerce others into unfair wages, prices, financial terms, working conditions, hours or other factors. Although we may not rob banks, steal from our employers, or shoplift, we may very likely be participating in unfair or unethical practices that deprive others of what rights should be theirs. It can be difficult, even career-limiting, to resist engaging in these practices, but we are called to do so nonetheless.

“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” (Exodus 20:16)

The ninth command honors the right to one’s own reputation.^[25] It finds pointed application in legal proceedings where what people say depicts reality and determines the course of lives. Judicial decisions and other legal processes wield great power. Manipulating them undercuts the ethical fabric

of society and thus constitutes a very serious offense. Walter Brueggemann says this commandment recognizes “that community life is not possible unless there is an arena in which there is public confidence that social reality will be reliably described and reported.” [26]

Although stated in courtroom language, the ninth commandment also applies to a broad range of situations that touch practically every aspect of life. We should never say or do anything that misrepresents someone else. Brueggemann again provides insight,

Politicians seek to destroy one another in negative campaigning; gossip columnists feed off calumny; and in Christian living rooms, reputations are tarnished or destroyed over cups of coffee served in fine china with dessert. These de facto courtrooms are conducted without due process of law. Accusations are made; hearsay allowed; slander, perjury, and libelous comments uttered without objection. No evidence, no defense. As Christians, we must refuse to participate in or to tolerate any conversation in which a person is being defamed or accused without the person being there to defend himself. It is wrong to pass along hearsay in any form, even as prayer requests or pastoral concerns. More than merely not participating, it is up to Christians to stop rumors and those who spread them in their tracks. [27]

This further suggests that workplace gossip is a serious offense. Some of it pertains to personal, off-site matters, which is evil enough. But what about cases when an employee tarnishes the reputation of a co-worker? Can truth ever truly be spoken when the person being talked about is not there to speak for him- or herself? And what about assessments of performance? What safeguards ought to be in place to ensure that reports are fair and accurate? On a large scale, the business of marketing and advertisement operates in the public space among organizations and individuals. In the interest of presenting one’s own products and services in the best possible light, to what extent may one point out the flaws and weaknesses of the competition, without incorporating their perspective? Is it possible that the rights of “your neighbor” could include the rights of other companies? The scope of our global economy suggests this command may have very wide application indeed. In a world where perception often counts for reality, the rhetoric of effective persuasion may or may not have much, if anything, to do with genuine truth. The divine origin of this command reminds us that people may not be able to detect when our representation of others is accurate or not, but God cannot be fooled. It’s good to do the right thing when nobody is watching. With this command, we understand that we must say the right thing when *anybody* is listening. See [Truth & Deception](http://www.theologyofwork.org) at www.theologyofwork.org for a much fuller discussion of this topic, including whether the prohibition of “false witness against your neighbor” includes all forms of lying and deception.

“You shall not covet ... anything that belongs to your neighbor” (Exodus 20:17)

Envy and acquisitiveness can arise anywhere in life, including at work, where status, pay and power are routine factors in our relationships with people we spend a lot of time with. We may have many good reasons to desire achievement, advancement or reward at work. But envy isn't one of them. Nor is working obsessively out of envy for the social standing it may enable.

In particular, we face temptation at work to falsely inflate our accomplishments at the expense of others. The antidote is simple, although hard to do at times. Make it a consistent practice to recognize the accomplishments of others and give them all the credit they deserve. If we can learn to rejoice in—or at least acknowledge—others' successes, we cut off the life-blood of envy and covetousness at work. Even better, if we can learn how to work so that our success goes hand-in-hand with others' success, covetousness is replaced by collaboration, and envy by unity. **CONTENT NOT YET AVAILABLE:** See **Motivation* at www.theologyofwork.org for a fuller discussion with a range of practical applications.

Leith Anderson was formerly pastor of Wooddale Church in Eden Prairie, Minnesota. He said, “As the senior pastor, it's as if I have an unlimited supply of coins in my pocket. Whenever I give credit to a staff member for a good idea, praise a volunteer's work, or thank someone, it's like I'm slipping a coin from my pocket into theirs. That's my job as the leader, to slip coins from my pocket to others' pockets, to build up the appreciation other people have for them.” [28]

Case laws in the Book of the Covenant (Exodus 21:1-23:33)

A collection of case laws follows, flowing from the Ten Commandments. Instead of developing detailed principles, it gives examples of how to apply God's Law to the kinds of cases that commonly arose in the conduct of daily life. As cases, they are all embedded in the situations faced by the people of Israel. Indeed, throughout the Pentateuch (the Torah), it can be difficult to sift out the specific laws from the surrounding narrative and exhortation. Four sections of the case law are particularly applicable to work today.

Slavery or indentured servitude (Exodus 21:1-11)

Although God liberated the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt, slavery is not universally prohibited in the Bible. Slavery was permissible in certain situations, so long as slaves were regarded as full members of the community (Genesis 17:12), received the same rest periods and holidays as non-slaves (Exodus 23:12; Deuteronomy 5:14-15 and 12:12), and were treated humanely (Ex. 21:7, 26-27). Most

importantly, slavery was not intended as a permanent condition, but a voluntary, temporary refuge for people suffering what would otherwise be desperate poverty. “When you buy a male Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years, but in the seventh he shall go out a free person, without debt” (Ex. 21:2). Cruelty on the part of the owner resulted in immediate freedom for the slave (Ex. 21:26-27). This made Hebrew slavery more like a kind of long-term labor contract among individuals, and less like the kind of permanent racial/class/ethnic exploitation that has characterized slavery in modern times.

Also in contrast to slavery in the United States, which generally forbade marriage among slaves, the regulations in Exodus aim to preserve families intact. “If he comes in single, he shall go out single; if he comes in married, then his wife shall go out with him” (Ex. 21:3). The general equality between slave owners and slaves is highlighted by the regulations about female slaves in Exodus 21:7-11. The only purpose contemplated for buying a female slave was so that she could become the wife of either the buyer or the buyer’s son (Ex. 21:8-9). She became the social equal (as wife) of the slaveholder, and the purchase functioned much like the giving of a dowry. Indeed, she is even called a “wife” by the regulation (Ex. 21:9). Moreover, if the buyer failed to treat the female slave with all the rights due an ordinary wife, he was required to set her free. “She shall go out without debt, without payment of money” (Ex. 21:11). Despite these regulations, it appears that in some cases, girls or women were bought as wives for a male slave, rather than for the slave owner or a son, which resulted in a very problematic situation (Ex. 21:4).

By no means does this suggest that slavery was an agreeable way of life. Slaves were, for the duration of their enslavement, property. Whatever the regulations, in practice there was probably little protection against maltreatment, and abuses occurred. The safeguards for foreign-born slaves were not as stringent as for Hebrews (Leviticus 25:44-46), and as noted above, protections for women were less than for men. As in much of the Bible, God’s word in Exodus did not create a new form of social and economic organization, but instructed God’s people how to live with justice and compassion in their present circumstances. To our eyes, the results do--and should--appear very disquieting.

In any case, before we become too smug, take a look at the working conditions that prevail among poor people in every corner of the world, including the developed nations. Ceaseless labor for those working two or three jobs to support families, abuse and arbitrary exercise of power by those in power, and misappropriation of the fruits of labor by illicit business operators, corrupt officials and politically connected bosses. Millions work today without so much as the regulations provided by the Law of Moses. If it was God’s will to protect Israel from exploitation even in slavery, what does God expect followers of Christ to do for those who suffer the same oppression, and worse, today?

Commercial restitution (Exodus 21:18-22:15)

The casuistic laws spelled out penalties for offenses, including many relating directly to commerce, especially in the case of liability for loss or injury. The so-called *lex talionis*, which also appears in Leviticus 24:17-21 and Deuteronomy 19:16-21, is central to the concept of retribution.^[29] Literally, the law says to pay with a life for a life that is taken, as well as an eye for an eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, and bruise for bruise (Ex. 21:23-25). The list is notably specific. When Israel's judges did their work, are we really to believe they applied punishments in this way? Would a plaintiff who was burned due to someone's negligence really be satisfied to see the offender literally burned to the same degree? Interestingly, in this very part of Exodus, we do not see the *lex talionis* being applied in this manner. Instead, a man who seriously injures another in a fight must pay for the victim's lost time and cover his medical expenses (Ex. 21:19). The text does not go on to say he must sit still for a public and comparable beating by his former victim. It appears that the *lex talionis* did not determine the standard penalty for major offenses, but that it set an upper ceiling for damages that could be claimed. Gordon Wenham notes, "In Old Testament times there were no police or public prosecution services, so all prosecution and punishment had to be carried out by the injured party and his family. Thus it would be quite possible for injured parties not to insist on their full rights under the *lex talionis*, but negotiate a lower settlement or even forgive the offender altogether."^[30] This law may be perceived by some today as savage, but Alec Motyer observed, "When English law hanged a person for stealing a sheep, it was not because the principle of 'an eye for an eye' was being practiced but because it had been forgotten."^[31]

This issue of interpreting the *lex talionis* illustrates that there may be a difference between doing what the Bible literally says and applying what the Bible instructs. Obtaining a biblical solution to our problems will not always be a straightforward matter. Christians must use maturity and discernment, especially in light of Jesus' teaching to forego the *lex talionis* by not resisting an evildoer (Matt 5:38-42). Was he speaking of a personal ethic or did he expect his followers to apply this principle in business? Does it work better for small offenses than it does for big ones? Those who do evil create victims who we are bound to defend and protect (Proverbs 31:9).

The specific instructions about restitution and penalties for thievery accomplished two aims. First, they made the thief responsible for returning the original owner to his original state or fully compensated him for his loss. Second, they punished and educated the thief by causing him to experience the full pain that he had caused for the victim. These aims can form a Christian basis for the work of civil and criminal law today. Judicial work today operates according to specific statutes and guidelines set by the state. But even so, judges have a measure of freedom to set sentences and penalties. For disputes that are settled out of court, attorneys negotiate to help their clients reach a conclusive agreement. In recent times, a perspective called "restorative justice" has emerged with an emphasis on punishment that restores the victim's original condition and, to the extent possible, restores the perpetrator as a productive member of society. A full description and assessment of such approaches is beyond our scope here, but we want to note that the Scripture has much to offer contemporary systems of justice in

this regard.

In business, leaders sometimes must mediate between workers who have serious work-related issues with one another. Deciding the right and fair thing affects not only the ones embroiled in the dispute, it also can affect the whole atmosphere of the organization and even serve to set precedent for how workers may expect to fare in the future. The immediate stakes may be very high. On top of this, when Christians must make these kinds of decisions, onlookers draw conclusions about us as people as well as the legitimacy of the faith we claim to live by. Clearly, we cannot anticipate every situation (and neither does the book of Exodus). But we do know that God expects us to apply his instructions, and we can be confident that asking God how to love our neighbors as ourselves is the best place to start.

Productive opportunities for the poor (Exodus 22:21-27 & 23:10-11)

God's intent to provide opportunities for the poor is seen in the regulations benefiting aliens, widows and orphans (Ex. 22:21-22). What these three groups had in common was that they did not possess land on which to support themselves. Often this made left them poor, so that aliens, widows and orphans are the main subjects whenever "the poor" are mentioned in the Old Testament. In Deuteronomy, God's concern for this triad of vulnerable people called for Israel to give them justice (Deuteronomy 10:18, 27:19) and access to food (Deuteronomy 24:19-22). Case law on this matter is also developed in Isaiah 1:17, 23; Isaiah 10:1-2; Jeremiah 5:28, 7:5-7, 22:3; Ezekiel 22:6-7; Zechariah 7:8-10; and Malachi 3:5.

One of the most important of these regulations is the practice of allowing the poor to harvest, or "glean," the leftover grain active fields and to harvest all volunteer crops in fields lying fallow. The practice of gleaning was not a hand-out, but an opportunity for the poor to support themselves. Landowners were required to leave each field, vineyard and orchard fallow one year in every seven, and the poor were allowed to harvest anything that might grow there (Exodus 23:10-11). Even in active fields, owners were to leave some of the grain in the field for the poor to harvest, rather than exhaustively stripping the field bare (Leviticus 19:9-10). For example, an olive grove or a vineyard was to be harvested only once each season (Deuteronomy 24:20). After that, the poor were entitled to gather what was left over, perhaps what was of lesser quality or slower to ripen. This practice was not only an expression of kindness, it was a matter of justice. The Book of Ruth revolves around gleaning, to enchanting effect; see "[Ruth 2:17-23](#)" in *Ruth and Work* at www.theologyofwork.org. Also, see "[Exodus 22:21-27](#)" in *Exodus and Work* at www.theologyofwork.org.

Today, there are many ways that growers, food producers and distributors share with the poor.^[32]

The common practice of restaurants offering discounts to senior citizens is in line with these Israelite laws, at least to the degree that older people are likely to be poor or vulnerable. But most people, in developed nations at least, no longer depend on agriculture for a living. In today's industrial and

technological societies, efficient resource utilization is the basis of successful production. There is nothing to glean on the floor of a stock exchange, assembly plant, or programming lab. But the principle of providing productive work for vulnerable workers is still relevant. Corporations can productively employ people with mental and physical disabilities, with or without government assistance. With training and support, people from disadvantaged backgrounds, prisoners returning to society and others who have difficulty finding conventional employment can become productive workers and earn a living. Other economically vulnerable people may have to depend on contributions of money instead of receiving opportunities to work. Here again the modern situation is too complex for us to proclaim a simplistic application of the biblical law. But the values underlying the law may offer a significant contribution to the design and execution of systems of public welfare, personal charity, and corporate social responsibility. Many Christians have significant roles in hiring workers or designing employment policies. Exodus reminds us that employing vulnerable workers is an essential part of what it means for a people to live under God's covenant. Together with Israel of old, Christians have experienced God's redemption too, though not necessarily in identical terms. But our basic gratitude for God's grace is certainly a powerful motive for finding creative ways to serve the needy around us.

Lending and collateral (Exodus 22:25-27)

Another set of case laws regulated money and collateral (Ex. 22:25-27). Two situations are in view. The first pertains to a needy member of God's people who requires a financial loan. This loan shall not be made according to the usual standards of money-lending. It shall be given without "interest." The Hebrew word *neshek* (which in some contexts means a "bite") has garnered a great deal of academic attention. Did *neshek* refer to *excessive* and therefore unfair interest charged on top of the reasonable amount of interest required to keep the practice of money-lending financially viable? Or did it refer to *any* interest? The text does not have enough detail to settle this conclusively, but the latter view seems more likely because in the Old Testament, *neshek* always pertains to lending to those who are in miserable and vulnerable circumstances, for whom paying any interest at all would be an excessive burden.^[33] Placing the poor into a never-ending cycle of financial indebtedness will stir Israel's compassionate God to action. Whether or not this law was good for business is not in view here. Walter Brueggemann notes, "The law does not argue about the economic viability of such a practice. It simply requires the need for care in concrete ways, and it expects the community to work out the practical details."^[34] The other situation envisages a man who puts up his only coat as collateral for a loan. It should be returned to him at night so that he can sleep without endangering his health (Ex. 22:26-27). Does this mean that the creditor should visit him in the morning to collect the coat for the day and to keep doing so until the loan is repaid? In the context of such obvious destitution, a godly creditor could avoid the near absurdity of this cycle by simply not expecting the borrower to put up any collateral at all. These regulations may have less application to today's banking system in general than to today's systems of protection and assistance for the poor. For example, micro-finance in less developed

countries was developed with interest rates and collateral policies tailored to meet the needs of poor people who otherwise have no access to credit. The goal—at least in the earliest years beginning in the 1970s—was not to maximize profit for the lenders, but to provide sustainable lending institutions to help the poor escape poverty. Even so, micro-finance struggles with balancing the lenders’ need for a sustainable return and default rates with the borrowers’ need for affordable interest rates and non-restrictive collateral terms. [35] CONTENT NOT YET AVAILABLE: See **Finance* at www.theologyofwork.org for more on the topics of interest and collateral.

The presence of specific regulations following the Ten Commandments means that God wants his people to honor him by putting his instructions into actual practice to serve real needs. Emotional concern without deliberate action doesn’t give the poor the kind of help they need. As the Apostle James put it, “Faith without works is dead” (James 2:26). Studying the specific applications of these laws in ancient Israel helps us to think about the particular ways we can act today. But we remember that even then, these laws were illustrations. Terence Fretheim thus concludes, “There is an open-endedness to the application of the law. The text invites the hearer/reader to extend this passage out into every sphere of life where injustice might be encountered. In other words, *one is invited by the law to go beyond the law.*” [36]

A careful reading reveals three reasons why God’s people should keep these laws and apply them to fresh situations. [37] First, the Israelites themselves were oppressed as foreigners in Egypt (Ex. 22:21, 23:9). Rehearsing this history not only keeps God’s redemption in view; memory becomes a motivation to treat others as we would like to be treated (Matthew 7:12). Second, God hears the cry of the oppressed and acts on it, especially when we won’t (Ex. 22:22-25). Third, we are to be his holy people (Ex. 22:31 and Leviticus 19:2).

The Tabernacle (Exodus 25:1-40:38)

The work of building the Tabernacle may seem to lie outside the scope of the theology of work project because of its liturgical focus. We should note, however, that the book of Exodus does not so easily separate Israel’s life in the categories of sacred and secular that we are so accustomed to. Even if we delineate between Israel’s liturgical and extra-liturgical activities, nothing in Exodus suggests that one is more important than the other. Furthermore, what actually happened at the Tabernacle cannot be equated fairly with “church work” today. Certainly, its construction has no close parallel in the construction of church buildings. The chapters in Exodus dealing with the Tabernacle are all about the *establishment* of a unique institution. Although the work of the Tabernacle would go on from year to year and be subsumed by the Temple, each of these buildings was by design, central and solitary. They were not exemplars to be reproduced wherever Israelites would settle down to live. In fact, the construction and operation of local shrines throughout the land proved to be a huge detriment to

Israel's national spiritual health. Finally, the purpose of the Tabernacle was not to give Israel an authorized place to worship. It was about the presence of God in their midst. This is clear from the outset in God's words, "Have them make me a sanctuary, so that I may dwell among them" (Ex. 25:8). Christians today understand that God dwelt among us in the person of his Son (John 1:14). Through his work, the entire community of believers has become God's temple in which God's Spirit lives (1 Corinthians 3:16). In light of these observations, we will take up two claims that relate to work. First, God is an Architect. Second, God equips his people to do his work.

The large section in Exodus about the Tabernacle is organized according to God's command (Ex. 25:1-31:11) and Israel's response (Ex. 35:4-40:33). But God did more than tell Israel what he wanted from them. He provided the actual design for it. This is clear from his words to Moses, "In accordance with all that I show you concerning the pattern of the tabernacle and the pattern of all its furniture, so you shall make it" (Ex. 25:9).^[38] The Hebrew word for "pattern" (*tavnit*) here pertains to the building and the items associated with it. Architects today use blueprints to direct construction, but it may have been that some kind of archetypal model was in view.^[39] Temples were often seen as earthy replicas of celestial sanctuaries (Isaiah 6:1-8). By the Spirit, King David received such a pattern for the Temple and gave it to his son Solomon, who sponsored the Temple's construction (1 Chronicles 28:11-12, 19). From the descriptions that follow, it is clear that God's architectural design is exquisite and artful. The principle that God's design precedes God's building is true of Israel's sanctuaries, as well as the New Testament worldwide community of Christians (1 Corinthians 3:5-18). The future New Jerusalem is a city only God could design (Revelation 21:10-27). God's work as Architect does give dignity to that particular career. But in a general sense, the people of God may engage in their work (whatever it is) with the awareness that God has a design for it, too. As we will see next, there are many details to work out within the contours of God's plan, but the Holy Spirit helps with even that.

The accounts of Bezalel, Oholiab, and all of the skilled workers on the Tabernacle are full of work-related terms (Ex. 31:1-11; 35:30-36:5). Bezalel and Oholiab are important not only for their work on the Tabernacle, but also as role models for Solomon and Hiram-abi who built the Temple.^[40] The comprehensive set of crafts included metalwork in gold, silver, and bronze as well as stonework and woodwork. The fabrication of garments would have required getting wool, spinning it, dyeing it, weaving it, designing clothes, manufacturing and tailoring them, and the work of embroidery. The craftsmen even prepared anointing oil and fragrant incense. What unites all of these practices is God filling the workers with his Spirit. The Hebrew word for "ability" and "skill" in these texts (*hokhmah*) is usually translated as "wisdom" which causes us to think about the use of words and decision-making. Here, it describes work that is clearly hands-on, yet spiritual in the fullest theological sense (Ex. 28:3; 31:3, 6; 35:26, 31, 35; 36:1-2).

The wide range of construction activities in this passage illustrates, but does not exhaust, what building in the ancient Near East entailed. Since God inspired them, we safely assume he desired them and

blessed them. But do we really need texts like these to assure us that God approves of these kinds of work? What about related skills that are *not* mentioned? Somewhat facetiously, had the Tabernacle needed an air-conditioning system, we assume God would have given plans for a good one. Robert Banks wisely recommends, “In the biblical writings, we should not interpret comparisons with the [modern] process of construction in too narrow or job-specific a fashion. Occasionally this may be justified, but generally not.”^[41] The point here is not that God cares more about certain types of labor than others. The Bible does not have to name every noble profession for us to see it as a godly thing to do. Just as people were not made for the sabbath, but the sabbath for people (Mark 2:27), building and cities are made for people too. The law that ancient houses be built with a protective parapet around the flat roof (Deuteronomy 22:8) illustrates God’s concern for responsible construction that truly serves and protects people. The point about the Spirit-gifting of the Tabernacle-workers is that God cared about *this particular* project for *these particular* purposes. Based on that truth, perhaps the enduring lesson for us in our work today is that whatever God’s work is, he does not leave his great work in our unskilled hands. The ways in which he equips us for his work may be as varied as are those many tasks. In divine faithfulness, the spiritual gifts God gives to us will strengthen us in doing God’s work to the very end (1 Corinthians 1:4-9). He provides us with every blessing in abundance so that we may share abundantly in every good work (2 Corinthians 9:8).

Conclusions from the Book of Exodus

In Exodus, we see God bring his people out of oppressive labor into the glorious freedom of the children of God. It is not a freedom from working, but a freedom to love and serve the Lord through work in every aspect of life. God provides guidance for life and labor that will glorify him and bless Israel. And he provides a place for his presence to bless all they do.

ENDNOTES

- [1] In Hebrew, the title is simply shemot, the word for “names of” which appears in the first sentence.
- [2] David J. A. Clines, *Theme of the Pentateuch*, 2nd ed. (T&T Clark, 1997), 29.
- [3] Clines, 47.
- [4] Bruce K. Waltke and Charles Yu, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 483-84 and 372.
- [5] Brevard S. Childs, *Memory and Tradition in Israel* (London: SCM Press, 1962).

- [6] Elmer Martens, *God's Design: A Focus on Old Testament Theology* (3rd edition). This section of the article follows Martens' analysis of the four-part outline of God's design.
- [7] English Bibles employ the convention of using the word "Lord" (in small capital letters as distinct from "Lord") to represent the Hebrew name of God, YHWH.
- [8] The literature in Old Testament theology on this point is immense both in scope and depth of analysis. This is understandable, given the pivotal importance of God's self-revelation. Providing even a summary of the issues and approaches to this matter exceeds the scope of this article. For an able discussion of what is at stake and a fuller understanding of the position taken in this article, see Bruce K. Waltke and Charles Yu, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 359-69.
- [9] Elmer A. Martens, *God's Design: A Focus on Old Testament Theology*, 3rd ed. (D & F Scott Pub Inc, 1997), 10.
- [10] For more on the land in the New Testament, see Waltke and Yu, 558-587.
- [11] Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (IVP Academic, 2006), 358.
- [12] Walter Brueggemann, "The Book of Exodus," in *The New Interpreter's Bible (Volume 1): Genesis to Leviticus* (Abingdon Press, 1994), 829.
- [13] Umberto Moshe David Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (Publisher's Row / Varda Books, 2005), 219.
- [14] For more on the word *hayil*, see the TOW Project article [Proverbs and Work](#), Proverbs 31:10-31, beginning with the section "[The Valiant Woman](#)" at www.theologyofwork.org.
- [15] Arthur Holmes, *All Truth is God's Truth* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1983).
- [16] Kenneth Barker (gen. ed.), *The NIV Study Bible* (Zondervan, 1999), 269.
- [17] Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (IVP Academic, 2006), 357-8.
- [18] Peter Enns, "Law of God" in Willem A. VanGemeren, ed., *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (Zondervan, 1997), 4:893. The word also refers to a body of

literature in that the historical core of the book of Deuteronomy is called “the Book of the Law,” (Deuteronomy 31:26). Traditionally, the entire Pentateuch is called “the Torah.”

- [19] Tim Keller, “Keller on Rules of the Bible: Do Christians Apply them Inconsistently?” (<http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/tgc/2012/07/09/making-sense-of-scriptures-inconsistency/>, accessed on July 10, 2012).
- [20] James Tabor and Randall Buth, *Living Biblical Hebrew for Everyone*, Pap/Com (Internet Language Corp, 2003).
- [21] Tim Keller, “Keller on Rules of the Bible: Do Christians Apply them Inconsistently?”
- [22] Gordon J. Wenham, *Exploring the Old Testament, Volume 1: A Guide to the Pentateuch* (IVP Academic, 2008), 71.
- [23] David W. Gill, *Doing Right: Practicing Ethical Principles* (IVP Books, 2004), 83. Gill’s book contains an extended exegesis and application of the Ten Commandments in the modern world, which repays careful attention.
- [24] United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Fact Sheet: Workplace Shootings 2010” accessible at <http://www.bls.gov/iif/oshwc/cfoi/osar0014.htm>.
- [25] Walter Brueggemann, “The Book of Exodus,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible (Volume 1): Genesis to Leviticus* (Abingdon Press, 1994), 431.
- [26] Brueggemann, 848.
- [27] Brueggemann, 432.
- [28] Reported by William Messenger from a conversation with Leith Anderson on October 20, 2004 in Charlotte, NC.
- [29] Walter Brueggemann, “The Book of Exodus,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible (Volume 1): Genesis to Leviticus* (Abingdon Press, 1994), 433. The principle is also present in the Code of Hammurabi (about 1850-1750 BC), though that code does not prioritize human life as highly as the *Torah* does.
- [30] Gordon J. Wenham, *Exploring the Old Testament, Volume 1: A Guide to the Pentateuch* (IVP Academic, 2008), 73.

- [31] J. A. Motyer, *The Message of Exodus: The Days of Our Pilgrimage* (IVP Academic, 2005), 240.
- [32] I (contributor Bob Stallman) personally recall a period early in our marriage when my wife and I would sometimes go in the autumn to a certain apple-packing facility in Eastern Washington. We were delighted that they allowed us to sort through bins of oddly-shaped apples that had been culled from those to be shipped to grocery stores. They were in other ways perfectly fine. We lived on a small budget, but the price of just three dollars per box ensured that for months we and our children enjoyed a full supply of fresh apples, apple pies, and canned applesauce.
- [33] Robin Wakely, entry “#5967 NSHK,” in Willem A. VanGemeren (gen. ed.), *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, 3:185–89.
- [34] Walter Brueggemann, “The Book of Exodus,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible (Volume 1): Genesis to Leviticus* (Abingdon Press, 1994), 868.
- [35] Rob Moll, “Christian Microfinance Stays on a Mission” in *Christianity Today*, May 2011. Accessible online at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2011/may/stayingonmission.html>
- [36] Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1991), 248 (italics original).
- [37] J. A. Motyer, *The Message of Exodus: The Days of Our Pilgrimage* (IVP Academic, 2005), 241.
- [38] The translation here slightly modifies the New Revised Standard translation to show how the key word “pattern” appears twice.
- [39] Victor Hurowitz, “The Priestly Account of Building the Tabernacle,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 105 (1985), 22. The word *tavnit* describes the three-dimensional shape of idols (Deuteronomy 4:16-18; Psalm 106:20; Isaiah 44:13), a replica of an altar (Joshua 22:28; 2 Kings 16:10) and the form of hands (Ezekiel 8:3, 10; 10:8).
- [40] Raymond B. Dillard, *2 Chronicles*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 15 (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 4-5.
- [41] Robert Banks, *God the Worker: Journeys into the Mind, Heart and Imagination of God* (Sutherland N.S.W.; Oxford: Albatross Books; Lynx Communications, 1992), 349.