

**THE RIGHT TO WORK  
A GIFT FROM THE CREATOR<sup>1</sup>**

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*Then Yahweh God took the earthling and put him in the  
Garden of Eden to administer it and to keep watch over it.  
(Gen. 2:15)*

The story of creation in Genesis 1-3 elevates human work as part of the divine plan for the care of Eden and the world at large. But before there is even a hint of the need for humans to labor in Eden, the story emphasizes the way in which God worked in creation. Along with the statement of simple divine fiat, “and God said, ‘Let there be . . .,’” are the verbs of action, “and God made . . ., and God separated . . ., and God called . . ., and God created . . ., God finished his work. . ., God rested from all his work” (Gen 1:3-2:3). The God of creation was a hard worker who in turn experienced the sweet pleasure of rest. One inference to be drawn from this emphasis on divine labor is that work and rest, which were good for the Creator, are good for those made in the image of the Creator.

The idea that God worked was not a new idea in the world of the Israelites and their neighbors. As is known from the Epic of Atrahasis (dating from the 18th century B.C., the time of Hammurabi), heaven was thought to be filled with high gods of leisure and subordinate gods of labor. According to this epic, a revolt of the lesser gods against their task masters was the reason for the creation of human beings. With open rebellion in heaven, but before a successful coup d’etat could be pulled off, the council of elite gods instructed the goddess Mami to create human beings. She mixed the blood of a god with earth’s clay and thereby made the human work machine and announced in heaven, “I have removed your heavy work,

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/right2work.html> .

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I have imposed your toil on man. You raised a cry for mankind, I have loosed the yoke, I have established freedom.” Thus was the human family created to do the work of the lesser gods. Heaven’s peace was restored and all the gods lived happily in leisure ever after. Heavenly freedom had been achieved by servitude on earth and gods rest because people work.

The biblical account offered an entirely different understanding of divine work and human labor. In Genesis, one senses that God’s working was the wellspring of divine pleasure, and human labor was a gift to those in the image of God. According to the priestly account (1:26-29), men and women were designed from the very beginning for responsibility and hard work: “let them have dominion . . .” and they were duly charged, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish . . . birds . . . and every living thing that moves upon the earth.” Similarly, the Yahwist’s account (2:5, 15; 3:23) speaks of God’s intention to make human beings responsible for Eden’s well being. The Hebrew *le’abdah uleshamerahin* in 2:15 means more than simply “to till it and watch it” (see the translation given at the beginning of this article). Even when cast out of Eden, ‘adam (male and female, for both had become “like one of us”) is sent out “to administer the land” (*la’abod ha’adamah*) east of Eden.” In John 5:17, Jesus affirmed, “My Father is working still, and I am working.” Work was not a curse for God nor for Jesus. In one sense of the word, work was viewed as a divine activity. For people, in the image of God, work remained a part of God’s gracious gift.

The terms *kabash* “subdue” and *rad/radah* “have dominion overall,” in 1:26-29, require comment lest the “job description” for human endeavor be misunderstood. These words do not legitimate the propensity of people who view work as a curse to violate the earth and decimate the animal kingdom. The verb *kabash* “subdue” does more than establish the hierarchal relationship among “animated beings” (i. e., the human *nefesh hayyah* in 2:9, and the animal *nefesh hayyah* in

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1:20, 21; 2:19).<sup>2</sup> In light of its Akkadian cognate *kabasu*, it means not only “to subdue, oppress” but also “to walk, stride, roam” and “to exert oneself” or “to put pressure on another.” In light of the Arabic by-form *qabasa* “to take coals/fire” (like the Hebrew *kibshan* “kiln”), it may have been used metaphorically to mean “to acquire knowledge, to teach.”

The Greek translation of Theodotian has here the verbs *upotasso* “to subject” and *paideuo* “to train, educate, instruct.” His identification of the imperative *radu* with the Hebrew and Arabic verb *rud* “to wander, roam (in search for food),” and its Syriac cognate which means in addition “to train, cultivate, instruct.”

If Theodotian was on the right track, the traditional “rule over the fish . . . , birds . . . , beasts . . .” may better be understood as either (a) *radu* (an imperative form) “tame!” or “give training to the fish . . . , birds . . . , and beasts” or (b) *radu* “go forth [from Eden] along with the fish, birds, and beasts!” This second alternative is the most attractive one in view of what follows, “Behold I have given you every plant . . . upon the face of the earth . . . for food.” Either way, this part of the job description suggests domestication and civilization more than subjugation.

However, this is not always as obvious as it should be. Many who know well the biblical story believe that human labor is a penalty and curse rooted in the fall of Adam and

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<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that the Hebrew text has the same term, *nefesh hayyah* “living creature,” in Genesis 1:20-21 for fish and birds, in 1:24 for cattle and beast, in 2:7 for the human male), and in 2:19 for beasts and birds. Translators obscure this fact by translating the *nefesh hayyah* in 2:7 referring the the man as “living being”; but the same *nefesh hayyah* in the other verses referring to beast, birds, and fish they translate as “living creature.” For the writer(s) of Genesis though, whatever had gills or lungs belonged to the same species, so to speak. The word *hayyah* means “animated, moving” and is even used for with reference to water which is moving (= English “running” water); and the word *nefesh* has to do with the throat through which the air goes that sustains life and makes one “a living soul.” (For fish and sea creatures being “living souls,” note the etymology of the English word “soul,” which may be derived from the Germanic *saiwa* “sea.”)

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Eve, rather than a gift bestowed by the Creator. This view that work is a curse is thought to have the support of Genesis 3:17 and 3:19. Recent translations of *be<sup>ʿ</sup>issbon to<sup>ʿ</sup>kalennah* in Genesis 3:17 have avoided the literal meaning “in sorrow you will eat of it,” found, in the King James and in the Septuagint’s *en lupais phage auten*. They offer instead the following: “in toil you shall eat” (RSV, following the ASV “in toil shall thou eat”), “you will have to work hard” (TEV, and its Spanish counterpart, “con duro trabajo”), and “in painful toil” (NIV). The shift from *sorrow* to *toil* in these translations is unfortunate for, intentionally or otherwise, they make a different theological statement about the nature of human work than the one required by the Hebrew text.

The term *be<sup>ʿ</sup>issabon* “in sorrow” in 3:17 cannot be dissociated from the *ʿissabonek* “your sorrow” and *be<sup>ʿ</sup>eseb* “in sorrow” in 3:16. The basic meaning of this word, like the Septuagint’s *lupeo*, means “to grieve, mourn, be in sorrow.” The sorrow addressed to Eve was related to infant mortality, childhood disease, adolescent trauma, and possibly even later battlefield casualty lists. It had nothing to do with the physical pain associated with childbirth, but with the heartbreak which came all too frequently after the birth.

The male, producing the fruit of earth, like the woman in producing the fruit of the womb, was to experience sorrow in his labor. Thus Adam faced that sorrow which accompanies barren soil, drought, flood, blight, crop failure and famine. *ʿIssabon* or *ʿeseb* should be translated “pain” only when it is clear that the pain is psychic, emotional, or psychosomatic in origin and not simply muscle fatigue from manual labor.

The point being made in this part of the Eden story is that Eve and Adam share the same *ʿissabon* as a consequence of the fall. Both will experience grief/sorrow in producing the fruit of the womb and the fruit of the field. But conceiving, giving birth, and rearing of children is not a curse; nor is working the ground or administering the earth a curse. After the fall as before the fall, work remained a part of the goodness in the divine scheme of things. So also did the imperative for procreation, “be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth.”

It is also noteworthy that the “sweat of your brow/face” in 3:19 is more literally, “the dripping of your nostrils.”

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Although this may refer to sweat dripping off the tip of the nose, it may also in this context indicate the nasal discharge from crying in grief and sorrow.