

Book Review – John Weaver

Theology of Work Project:

Theology of Work Bible Commentary Volume 1: Genesis through Deuteronomy

Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2015, ISBN 978-1-61970-660-6

Theology of Work Bible Commentary Volume 2: Joshua through Song of Songs

Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2015, ISBN 978-1-61970-709-2

Calling and Work

Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2015, ISBN 978-1-61970-693-4

In FiBQ 16:1 William Messenger wrote an introduction to the Theology of Work Project. Here John Weaver reviews the first two books to be published in the series.

These three texts are part of the resource offered by the Theology of Work Project (www.theologyofwork.org). This Project started in 2007 with the intention to research and write about what the Bible says about work. The project approached the task in two unique ways: a) to research the whole Bible for every passage that applies to work. b) to include as wide a breadth of the Christian community as possible.

The project has succeeded in creating a commentary covering all 66 books of the Bible as they apply to work, workers and workplaces. On June 12th, 2014 the completed Theology of Work Bible Commentary appeared online. The five-volume print edition was produced in 2014-2015.

To date, the Theology of Work Project has included 138 contributors from 23 countries on five continents, representing about 100 organisations. Responsibility for final approval of every passage was vested in 19 Steering Committee members from around the world.

William Messenger, the founder of the project, notes that his team were amazed at how much the Bible says about work. They found 859 passages of scripture that relate to work in some specific way. Messenger says that he used to think the Bible was a book about religion, with a few applications to work. But it's not. The Bible is a book about God, and it turns out that God shows up where God's people spend their time, which is mostly at work¹. Messenger comments that there are hundreds of millions of workplace Christians around the world, and it is important to work out how to

reach and equip all of God's people in every kind of workplace around the globe. The next step is to create resources for specific occupations and situations.

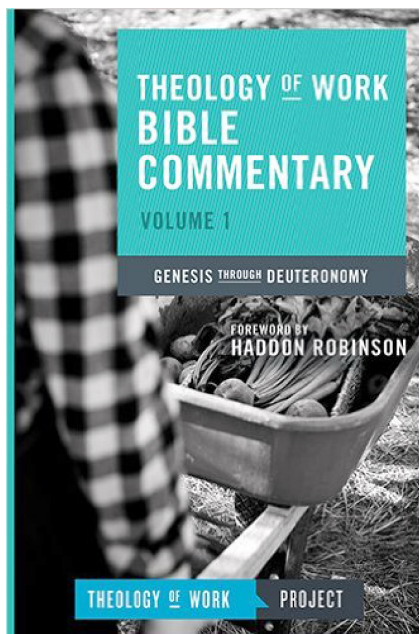
The commentaries are useful explorations of the biblical texts, but when we add the discussion of the nature of work as it appears in the scriptural text, we have a unique resource for those wishing to explore faith and work.

The first two volumes, reviewed here, explore the major part of the Hebrew scriptures apart from the Prophets.

Some of the biblical books have more direct relevance to a theology of work, such as Genesis, Leviticus, Ruth, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. In some the connection to work-related issues is a little forced. For example, having identified the Song of Songs as a 'racy' love poem, it is surprising to see focus on the agricultural life in springtime as pleasure, and the tenuous connection of passionate sex with the household and work.

Genesis provides us with work as a creation mandate: God creates people to work, to work in God's image, to be in relationship with others: for growth, fruitfulness, and the provision of needs, all within limits – recognising the rhythm of work and rest.

Leviticus provides practical instructions for workers and the workplace. We have some key passages such as the call to love our neighbour (19:18), and the law of Jubilee (chapter 25). The Old Testament laws of Sabbath and Jubilee provide some important principles for farming and food production: sharing – with the poor; caring – for the earth; and restraint – of power and wealth. Jubilees were about sufficiency, recognition of limits, and the need for God's creation to rest. They recognised that creation belongs to all of us and ultimately to God – the concept of



global commons (land, air, sea). The Jubilee laws of Israel regulated the Israelites' ownership and use of the land so that it was sustainable and so that *shalom*, wellbeing, might exist in the community. The idea of Jubilee also emphasises rest for those living in poverty, and the need for fair allocation of wealth.

There is also the law of gleaning (19:9-10), which gave dignity to the poor, enabling them to work for food. Leviticus deals with treating workers fairly, the rights of people with disabilities, justice and fair trading. The book of Ruth is a good example of this, where God bestows his blessing through the productivity of human labour, the dignity and value of workers, and the challenge to see work as a faith-filled calling, whether performed by wealthy landowners or poverty-stricken foreigners. It is here that God's love is expressed and where God is given glory.

Proverbs calls us to find God's wisdom for life and work. Focusing especially on Proverbs chapter 31, the writers explore the trustworthy worker, who works for the good of others, and is honest and diligent. The diligent worker plans for the long term, and contributes to the profitability of the enterprise. The wise worker is shrewd, seeks good advice, and improves her skills. The wise worker is generous and just. It is notable that such a worker is a woman. The writers conclude that our work habits are shaped by our character, which in turn is shaped by our knowledge of God.

Ecclesiastes contains pithy practical teaching about work, its ups and downs, and its ultimate transitory nature. Work may not in the end be a glorious success – you might produce a wonderful ocean-going vessel but a bad captain might destroy your work on the rocks.

There is so much of value in these commentaries, which give a whole new perspective on reading the biblical text. They are a most useful addition to the preacher's and bible teacher's library.

1. William Messenger, *The Theology of Work Project*, FiBQ 17.1, 2015, pp.16-19


In addition to the commentaries, the volume *Calling and Work* is a series of studies which explores the nature of all work as part of Christian discipleship. They open with the challenge that 'if we are not following Christ during the 100,000 hours of our lives that we spend at work, are we really following Christ?'

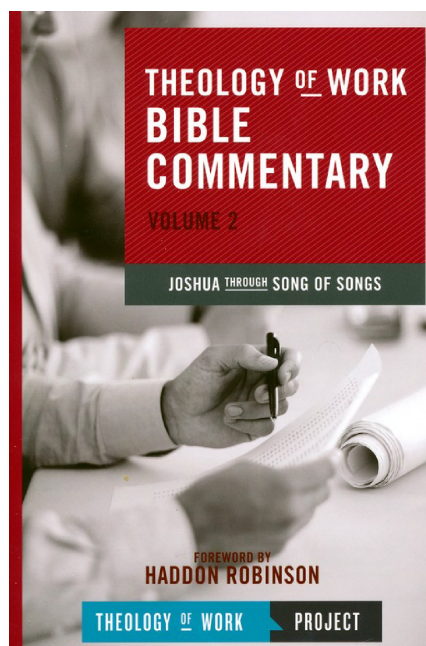
The authors do not ignore the fact that many people will spend years at work with no sense of vocation, and sometimes in very difficult and depressing situations. Our calling is to life and not only to work. Helpfully the authors explore the exact nature of our calling – we are called to belong to Christ and to participate in his redemptive mission in and for the world. We are called to restored relationships with God, with others, and with creation. Work is part of our participation in the life of Christ – creation and redemption.

There are sections that deal with identifying a call to a particular work. In exploring guidance, the authors identify the needs of the world: the need for justice, and freedom from disease, oppression, abuse and deception. They recognise that calling and gifting is not restricted to work within the church, as all work is subject to God's calling and all work has equal status. They challenge us to take seriously the call of God to various kinds of 'ordinary' work.

This is a helpful study guide to enable church members to explore the nature of their work and its

relationship to their worship of God. It is biblically based throughout, although the argument that Moses the political leader and David the military leader are examples of non-church related work is unconvincing and strains the understanding of the text. These, after all, were God's appointed religious leaders, both acting as priests and prophets.

Nevertheless this will be a useful study guide for individuals or groups to work through. 



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