

“Decent work” within the Bible

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We currently call into question work and employment and this is marked by the situation in our country: most people who are employed are salaried, within a company and a legal system borne of industrialisation. It would be out of the question to try to find similar situations in ancient times and to try to discover within the Bible what is meant by the expression « decent work ». It is therefore up to us to translate what we read with regards to the questions posed by the situation of today's workers.

Work according to the account of creation in Gen 1,26-2,4a: an ideal

The people of the Bible had been demolished. Nebuchadnezzar had taken over the country, destroyed the Temple and brought the Davidic dynasty (the House of David) (586 BC) to an end. The elite of the nation had been deported to Babylon and were governed by the laws of the conqueror. In particular they witnessed the cult to the great god Marduk and were seen as « backward », adoring the god of losers. It was the priests who would offer resistance. Despite the situation which seemed to prove them wrong, they insisted that their God was great, and the creator of the whole universe and the whole of humanity.

The story begins with a great tidy-up of nature. The place is ready to welcome the living species that will be created. On the sixth day, God creates the different animals. In v. 26, for the first time, he seems to « hold counsel » with himself for the creation of the human being, and then concludes (v. 31): it was very good!

The human being has been created in the image and likeness of God. How will this proximity with the creator materialise? The human being is called upon to do as He did: bringing order by subjugating the earth and bringing new life, fertile. History has shown that the different civilisations, and especially ours, have in reality misunderstood and translated the « subjugating » as « destroying ». This submission is essentially reached through work, in all its forms.

What can we discover about work?

- Work makes a human being. In particular it is through work that human beings resemble God, by controlling nature and the animals.
- Without taking into account reality, the text includes both men and women in the phrase « replenish the earth and subdue it ». Now, and even more so in those

days, it is clear that men and women's work is very different, but it is the assertion of a radical equality that must be reached.

- After having created human beings God considered creation as having been completed. He brings to a close his act of creation, stops « working » and rests. We could say that God places a limit on his power and his activity: the seventh day is sanctified as a day of rest. This is an invitation for all humans: work cannot take over the whole of our lives. In order to be human, decent, he must limit himself and make time to rest, to relax, to celebrate and also to worship.
- The food God gave to living creatures is surprising: herbs for animals and humans, and also trees for humans. And yet any living thing that could was also eating meat. Why isn't it mentioned? Eating meat presupposes killing a living creature, albeit an animal. This violence evokes violence against humans. It is excluded from the project of creation. In the same way violence must be excluded from work: the worker shall not be a victim of violence and nor shall he instigate it. This is another condition of decent work.

The reality: the work of a slave in Egypt (Ex, chap. 2 and 5)

Over the last few years, research carried out and discoveries made by historians and archaeologists have changed drastically our interpretation of the book of Exodus. It remains that the historical elements of this text are likely: Semite people lived in Egypt and were forced to build towns close to the Delta. But we cannot be much more precise. History was written for important people who don't care a great deal about the slaves.

The tradition of Israel has presented the situation as the destruction and the humiliation of a people. The exodus from Egypt is told like a flight (14,5) or like an expulsion (12,31). The account probably takes inspiration from historical events: the expulsion of the Hyksos from the valley of the Nile. Shepherd-kings, the Hyksos had invaded and dominated Egypt from the 18th until the 16th century BC.

How does the text tell this story? After some years of prosperity amongst the nomadic tribes in Egypt, a new king ("who had not known Joseph") came to power. The noble Egyptians who recovered didn't take kindly to the Asian immigrants on their land, close to the border and routes of invasion. The number of Israelites had grown, to the point of becoming a danger to Egypt. Curiously, it was during this oppression that the promise made to Abraham was realised: a long lineage.

The control of the state strengthened and building sites were opened. Contingents of miners were sent to the Sinai copper mines. Extra workforces were needed for the new towns being built. Forcing them to work made them less dangerous at the same time. The old (semi-)nomads were thus forced into hard labour: trampling the mortar, moulding the bricks, drying them out in the sun, carrying them to the foot of the walls being built, all under the watchful eye of guards armed with sticks and whips.

It was a total change of life for these new slaves and their families. They used to work for themselves, for their families and for their tribes. Now they were building towns for the new masters of Egypt. They used to be free and then they became slaves. They used to own herds and now they themselves were owned by the Pharaoh.

The repression worsened in stages. Firstly they were subjected to the fatigue duty of construction (1,11s) in the shopping towns or the garrison towns. This prestigious work was supposed to prevent the people from growing. They were ruled by fatigue duty chiefs, who made their life very difficult. If forced labour is a formidable way of preventing them from multiplying (1,10), is it not because the men forced to work on site were kept apart from their wives? The extermination of boys at birth prevented the foundation of Israelite families, which was a threat to the people. Only the midwives offered some resistance. As a consequence of this slow suppression of these people and its submission, internal feuds arose and despair took hold (2,13; 14,12): those who were being dominated had even lost the desire to free themselves or be freed.

In Ex 5,1, Moses asks that his people may have some time and a place of freedom and suggests a pilgrimage to the desert. The Pharaoh refuses and sees the demand for worship as idleness, loss of productivity, fraud. He doubles the harshness of the work. This is how the oppressors responded to their fear of the oppressed. They blamed them – idle! (5,17) – and aim of the work changes: it is no longer a question of output, but more of humiliation and exaggerated rhythm that exhausts man, to the point of absurdity (going into the fields to find the straw needed for making traditional raw bricks).

So here is the question: is our God competent on the Pharaoh's building sites? He proved himself in the lives of the semi-nomadic shepherds, finding their way, looking for pastures, multiplying and feeding the herds. He was their security for the future of the clan. But all of that was being dissolved with these new conditions of work and life. Was the god of the semi-nomadic shepherds capable of hearing the cry of the slaves from the Pharaoh's building sites? The answer is clear: God's chosen people cannot be enslaved. God is not a strong and oppressive sovereign; he chooses the side of the slaves, of the weak.

What can we find out about the work of a slave?

Work is of paramount importance for liberation. The alternatives are within work or outside of it. The people aspire to work for themselves and profit from the result in the long-term. They want to stop work to rest or to celebrate. Finally, they long to work in a nice atmosphere, without excessive effort or fatigue.

The prospects of the exodus from Egypt, are the gift of the earth that the Israelites will work and whose fruits they will harvest. The promise is not one of rest, but of productive work in the Promised Land. In the beginning God gave his people the

fruits without them having to work for them. Afterwards, he blessed them so that they may enjoy the fruits of their labour. Nevertheless in this text there is a reference to the right to rest and celebrate (5,1.5 ; 10,9).

What is the link between work and justice? The workers of the eleventh hour (Mt 19,30-20,16)

The parable takes us to the Kingdom of God. At the time it must have been told to the Jewish religious elite who criticised Jesus' attitude towards sinners. What is it about? What relationships does it establish among human beings, especially regarding work? If we dream of an ideal world in the eyes of God, how should we see it? These are two concepts of justice that we shall deal with. What is social justice and how do we achieve it?

The debate concerns the distance to be kept between men, here according to their work. Society is organised into a hierarchy according to property: the master is the owner of a house and a vineyard, he employs a bursar and day labourers. The gravity of the economic crisis has in fact ruined numerous small owners and the day labourers who rely on vacancies and being hired for daily work are too many.

The scene is public, in the village square. Why was the last group of workers hired so late? The text doesn't say. Each reader must fill in the gaps, in his own way, according to his own social solidarity... and involve nobody else in the reading.

The contract relating to salary is fair: 1 penny a day, payable immediately, as is written in the Old Testament when talking about day labourers: the penny is their usual day's salary.

Work in the countryside is hard. The vineyards are situated on the hillside. There is a lot of work to be done: working the stony earth, building fencing to keep out wild animals and the livestock, guarding the vineyard, choosing plants, looking after them, etc. The working day, 12 hours long, is under an unforgiving sun.

What can we discover about work and the relationships it creates?

The phrases at the beginning and at the end of this passage (19,30 and 20,16) guide our thoughts to who will be first or who will be last. It's an illustration of the hierarchy reversal in the Kingdom of God: many situations which we may take for granted shall be reversed. On the other hand, taken in isolation, the parable suggests that we shouldn't go from one hierarchy to an inverted hierarchy, but that we move to equality.

The reply from the vineyard owner is at first negative: he has not committed an injustice, the terms of the contract have been observed, all he's doing is using his own goodness. More positively, he explains his behaviour as kindness. It's a warning: an attitude of kindness makes the speakers bitter, but they must not hold the kind person responsible. He gives to each one, not according to the work done or

according to his own whim, but according to the living wage: each one receives it (a penny) as a right, whatever the work carried out. Man is not measured by the work done; his rights are beyond this rule. Those excluded from work have their own luck... and they have their dignity. Recognising this, now there's a sign of the Kingdom of God, already perceptible in Jesus' life. Is the kindness contagious? What is right then is not the precise recognition of the « merits » of each person, for example here the very real hardness of the work carried out. Justice means guaranteeing that everyone will earn the living wage; their needs will be met, because the human being is an end and not a means to produce.

When Matthew wrote this text for his community, his reminder is important: the fact that the heathens, who were called last, pass to being first, is a sign in the Kingdom of the sky. Taking up this position justifies the heathens who become converts in the Church, to the scandal of rigid Judaism and the Christians who share its position. It is also a warning: being the first gives you no rights. The parable expresses the perfect equality of the Christian community.

The vineyard symbolises the people of God, the whole of humanity. The quantity or quality of work, the output, age, the job title or status are not sources of privileges because they are responses to a free call. On the contrary, the feeling of merit evokes dissatisfaction and division. The free call provokes a disinterested response: work is not for sale. It must create equality and a community spirit rather than inequality.

In Jesus' time, the situation of the workers called to mind the situation of the fishermen who had no rights in the eyes of the "pure", Pharisees or Essenians. Jesus' behaviour is connected to the Kingdom of God: it stems notably from his actions in favour of the fishermen. His love is received in the work, notably in considering other workers as equals and to be respected under all conditions: there is no question of the unemployed being excluded.

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