

NO IDLE GOD

By JOHN L. MCKENZIE

THE COMBINED geniuses of Shaw, Lerner and Loewe produced the fictitious Alfred Doolittle, who sang in *My Fair Lady* that with a little good fortune man can see that the work which providence has equipped him to do will be done by another. Both the lines and the character express the ambiguity of man's attitude towards work. Mr Doolittle dedicated his life to survival without gainful employment; and what little worry his manner of life caused him was in his mind much less than the worry employment causes to those who depend upon it. Is work rewarding, or is it a punishment? Is it joy or sorrow? Is it a blessing or a curse? Many people enjoy their work, many pretend to enjoy it, many people detest it, and by some paradox of the human condition many people pretend to detest it. We have the antithesis of work and play, or work and leisure, or work and pleasure, or simply work and non-work. In every antithesis there is expressed or concealed an identification of joy and pleasure with non-work. Yet no one questions the possibility that work can be pleasant, or that work is necessary, even if 'some one else' must do it. Mr Neville Shute in *On the Beach*, among other grisly touches, alludes to what happens in a community when people cease to work because doom is certain and imminent. Food is neither cultivated nor marketed, rubbish is not cleaned up, garbage lies in heaps. He reminds us how utterly we depend on those whose work is done in hidden corners and in the night and early morning hours; and he also suggests that the extermination of man is more likely to happen because man is smothered in his own rubbish than from some thermonuclear disaster.

Can man's ambiguity towards work be resolved from the bible? Hebrew has a verb and a cognate noun which we translate 'work' and a verb which we translate 'make'. Both words are often applied to God; but the noun 'work', when used of divine work, has overtones like those of the english word when it is used of the 'works' of Shakespeare, Mozart or Michelangelo. The works of God are by definition 'wonderful', and the word for 'wonder' is often used in synonymous parallelism with 'work'. If we go behind the counting

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of words to the biblical texts themselves, there is no doubt that God is described as a worker, indeed the supreme worker. Now work, like any anthropomorphic term, describes God in human features; but it is precisely the choice of terms that gives the biblical image of God its peculiar character. God could have been represented as above work, as one for whom work is done rather than as one who performs it, as one whose perfect beatitude excludes the necessity of work. But he does work, and the major difference between the works of God and the works of man is that the works of God are perfect.¹

First God makes the scene of history. Creation is called a work² even in the first creation narrative, the stages of which are marked by the refrain 'Let it be . . . and it became'. In several of the eight 'works' of the six days the creation command is followed by the statement that God made the object of the work. This has suggested to some critics that the narrative arose from a double recension, one which used the theme of making and the other the theme of the creative word. The theme of the word, it seems, is intended to raise the image of creation above the level of work, at least of work as man knows it; but even in the hypothesis of a double recension the theme of making is not excluded. The word '*bara*', which we translate 'create', is used only of God; but the word is made explicit by the ideas of word and of making. The narrative of the sixth day ends with the statement that God looked at all he had made and found it exceedingly good. This is surely one of the most human statements about the deity found in the entire bible; it hints at the joyous surprise of the workman when he sees that what he wanted to make has come off very well. It is what he wanted it to be.

In the second account of creation³ the image of God the worker is much more candidly proposed; this is one of the reasons why critics believe that this passage is more primitive than the first.⁴ God makes the body of man as the potter fashions clay into a vessel; this image is echoed in the conventional biblical phrase in which man is called the work of God's hands. But then God does what no potter can do; he breathes into the nostrils of the *corpus*, and since the breath of God, the spirit, is life, man begins to live. But man appears in the midst of a desert watered by a single source, like the deserts which bound the land of ancient Israel on the east and

¹ Deut 32, 4.

³ Gen 2; the designation is not entirely accurate.

² Gen 2, 3.

⁴ Gen 1.

south. This is not a fit habitation for man; observe again that God is represented in a human fashion, working his way through a project step by step. Therefore God 'plants', like a peasant, a garden in the midst of the desert; and he makes man the caretaker of this garden, thus committing to man the work which maintains his own work. But something is missing; man should not be alone. Again in the manner of the worker who executes his project by experiment, God makes animals and parades them before man; but none of them is enough like him to be a companion. Then, still speaking in the most human manner, inspiration comes to the worker; and he fashions a companion for the man by an entirely new process. It may be noticed that this process is described with a fulness of detail which exceeds the previous steps. The work is finished, and man's acceptance of the final work crowns the whole, as God's perception of the goodness of his work crowns the work of the first account.

The early chapters of Genesis are not the only passages of the Old Testament which allude to creation, although they are the best known and the most discussed. The reader who wishes to pursue the theme should read what are called hymns of creation.¹ He will find that in these passages the theme of God the worker is retained but with different nuances. It is God who works with exultant joy, almost with playfulness, producing things for the pleasure of producing them — one is tempted to say of a few passages for sport. It is God the artist as well as God the worker who appears in these hymns. In Proverbs, wisdom, the attribute by which God creates, plays in his presence while he fashions earth, sea and sky. In Job, God challenges Job to imitate, if he can, the wonders which God fashions easily and casually.

We have alluded to wisdom as the attribute by which God creates. In the Old Testament 'wise' is an adjective applied to craftsmen, and we usually translate it as 'skilful'. The translation is inadequate, but no English word is adequate. The wise workman knows his trade, of course, and in that sense wise means skilful. But the wise workman also knows what he is doing; he works according to plan, he knows the proportions of means and end, and he knows when he has succeeded. This is not out of harmony with the kind of experimental work which we think we see in the second chapter of Genesis. There was no method and no technique

Isai 40, 12-26; Ps 104 (103); Job 26 and 38-39; Prov 8, 22-31.

for creation; it was an entirely new and original venture. The wise workman, when faced with such a task, draws on his invention rather than on established techniques, testing each step as he goes in view of the end he has in mind. So did God create in wisdom, producing at each step what was necessary for the next step. His joy at the outcome is the joy of the worker who produces something entirely new which is successful. But God's new work, unlike the works of inventive craftsmen, will not be improved by other craftsmen. It is perfect beyond improvement when he finishes it. When we observe such details as this, we see that the human image of God the worker is even more daring than we first thought.

The Old Testament uses a number of images to describe God the worker; and images, unlike philosophical abstractions, do not have and do not need perfect unity and coherence. The first creation account¹ clearly represents God as finishing his work and resting. The poems of Job² and some similar passages represent God as constantly maintaining his work. In much ancient near eastern mythology creation was considered as a task which had to be constantly renewed. The first creation account does not employ this image. But the cosmological poems do employ it; God perpetually guards the world against the forces of the chaos from which the world emerged, and into which it would relapse did not God set bounds upon darkness and the abyss. Chaos is sometimes described in terms which suggest the monsters of mesopotamian and canaanite mythology. In these features of the poems it is not so much God the worker who appears as God the conqueror; creation is a victorious act, but the victory must be preserved. This image is related to the feature of God's work which we now adduce.

God not only manufactures the scene upon which the drama of history is enacted, he also directs the events. To this direction as well as to creation the words 'work' and 'make' are applied, indeed applied with a peculiar force; for these works are greater wonders than the works of creation. It is from the works of God in history that the israelites recognized that he is a living God; the gods of nations, who do not act, are dead. In this way the israelites were the first to propose a 'god-is-dead' theology. Man shows that he is alive by his works, and the same principle was applied to the deity. God is neither inactive nor uninvolved, and when he works in history he works by his strong arm and his outstretched hand. The israelites

¹ Gen 1.

² Job 38-9.

were unacquainted with 'push-button' management and hence they were unable to attribute this kind of work to God. It is not without interest that in later Jewish literature, both biblical and non-biblical, God became more remote, accomplishing his purpose through heavenly mediators. This fear of the near and present activity of God is not found in the older books of the Old Testament, but it is found in more recent Christian writings as well as in Jewish literature. The work of God in history in most of the Old Testament is a direct personal intervention, without mediators or helpers; one may consult Isaiah: 'He saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no one to intervene; then his own arm brought him victory, and his righteousness upheld him'.¹

What are the works of God in history? They can all be summed up under the two themes of salvation and judgment. Each of these themes admits a special exposition of its own which would take us far beyond the limits of this essay; our interest here is that they are an important component of the image of God the worker. They are the continuation of his creative work; for it is through the works of his creation that God accomplishes both his saving acts and his judgments. In Old Testament thought the world, which we have called the scene of the drama of history, is also one of the actors in the drama. The world responds to man's response to God and becomes the agent both of the blessing and of the curse. It withholds its abundance from the wicked and opens its treasures to the righteous. One may find this view too simple and naive, but it is difficult to restate the moral principle involved. God does work in his creation, but his work is purposeful; and his purpose is that man should live as he ought.

It is not only through the world that God works in history. He is also the lord of kings and nations, and he governs their rise and their fall. They too are the instruments of his saving acts and his judgments, whatever their own purposes may be. Amos perhaps puts this work of God in the most striking terms: 'Does evil befall a city unless the Lord has done it?'²

No nation conquers others, no empires are built, and none are demolished, except by God's work. It is here that his work is most wonderful, most strange and mysterious. God is the wise worker here as in creation, but his wisdom is even deeper. He works through men who have their own power and purpose, but they

¹ Isai 59, 16.

² Amos 3, 6.

accomplish his will without knowing it, even when they think they are defeating it. His purposes in history are more obscure than his purposes in nature, and when he reveals them they are often incredible to those who hear the revelation. The skilled worker often does things when he is at work which the observer cannot grasp; and even when the finished product appears the observer still does not understand the process by which it was produced. It is a commonplace used by several biblical writers both in Old and New Testament that God works in history like the potter at his wheel; and one who does not know ceramics sometimes thinks that the potter is destroying rather than making. The wise worker is perfect master of his material and of his technique, and those who lack his wisdom must trust him.

Here, as we noticed above, the israelite view may seem too simple and naive; and of course in many ways israelite culture was more simple and naive than ours. Yet an attempt to restate the principle in more sophisticated language leads rather easily to a view of a God who does not work, who is inactive and therefore dead. There are certain risks in a belief in a God who works in history, risks of profound misunderstanding and misinterpretation of history. We are aware of these risks, perhaps less aware of the risks of excluding God from work in history or of involving him less. The israelite idea of God the worker emphasized the wisdom of the worker and thus avoided most of the risks implicit in their belief. A more sophisticated understanding will attempt to preserve God's integrity by hinting that God is really above history, and can only become involved in it by compromising himself; and it will detach God from history.

The works of God in creation and in history merge in his saving acts; for he did not make the world a chaos, he formed it to be inhabited.¹ While his judgments can return the world to the waste from which it emerged,² this is not the end of his work. The end of his work is the creation of a new heaven and a new earth,³ upon which he can look and say, as he saw at the beginning, that his work is exceedingly good. The work of creation is not really considered as a finished work, as we have noticed, but as a work which awaits an eschatological completion.

It seems, then, that God is represented as one who works, as one whose work is always perfect and successful. How does the bible

¹ Isai 45, 18.

² Isai 24, 1-13; Jer 4, 23-26.

³ Isai 65, 71; 66, 22.

view the work of man? In one respect the biblical view of man's work is usually pessimistic; man's work often fails, is always imperfect, and has no lasting value. It is utterly beneath comparison with the work of God. But the biblical view of man's work is no more pessimistic than the biblical view of man, who is the object of God's saving acts in spite of the fact that he is flesh. Man's work cannot be more important than man himself, but in the eyes of God man is not totally negligible.

The work of man is taken for granted in the bible; it is not submitted to analysis or evaluation. The narrative of Genesis ¹ may seem ambivalent about the work of man; man is placed in the garden to work it and to care for it,² but after his sin his work is cursed.³ There is no real disharmony between the two passages. Man's destiny of work is not changed, but the conditions under which he works are changed. Work is not a curse in this passage; but it is laid under the curse of difficulty and failure. The beatitude of man is often – not always – described in the Old Testament as a return to paradise; this would be a return to work which is not plagued by thorns and thistles and which is not done in the sweat of man's brow until inevitable death comes.

The Old Testament does not conceive beatitude anywhere as a life free from work. Both Amos and Isaiah speak harshly of those who lived easily and idly in their times.⁴ They would accept the parable of Dives and Lazarus,⁵ in which the wicked rich man is charged with nothing except comfortable living, as well as the parable of the rich fool,⁶ who dies just when he has amassed enough wealth to live in idleness. Such themes as this are less common in the Old Testament because the ancient israelite world did not offer the opportunities for idleness which the world offered in New Testament times. Obviously one sees in these passages the implication that one who frees himself from the obligation of work is offensive both to God and to man. The bible, both Old and New Testament, knew the work of slaves, and we are sometimes surprised that it does not speak of this crime against humanity more frequently and more vigorously. The work of the slave was appreciated by some and ignored by others, just as we today sometimes look at 'menial' services as if they were done by a machine. The writers of the bible apparently had no vision of a world without slavery; and

¹ Gen 2-3.

⁴ Amos 4, 1-3; Isai 3, 16-17; 5, 11-12.

² Gen 2, 15.

⁵ Lk 16, 19-31.

³ Gen 3, 17-19.

⁶ Lk 12, 16-21.

we ought to recognize how radical and incredible such a vision would have been during the biblical period. Man's destiny of work is not enslavement, and in man's eschatological salvation there will be no enslavement. But in a world in which work was man's destiny, the slave shared in the universal destiny.

Sirach pays a somewhat left-handed compliment to tradesmen and craftsmen – the ploughman, the jeweller, the smith and the potter.¹ He knows the strain and the fatigue of their work, and he is compassionate. Without them, he says, a city cannot be built and no one will live there; and he concludes by saying that they sustain the fabric of the world, and their prayer is in the practice of their trade. Such an appreciation of the crafts is not too common in the bible – as we have said, man's work is taken for granted. Sirach's compliment is left-handed because he compares the work of these men, essential as it is, with the wisdom of the scribe, and they come off very poorly. The man who works with his hands has neither the time nor the opportunity to become wise; and the compliment turns out to be mixed with intellectual snobbishness. Sirach was not acquainted with the rabbinical tradition that every scribe should have a craft or a trade by which he earned his living.

Much of the Old Testament is dominated by what we call the peasant ideal. The good life is life on the land without the problems which normally attend life on the land. When Micah describes life after the judgment of the nations and the establishment of universal peace as a life in which each man can sit under his vine and under his fig tree with none to terrify, he certainly speaks to a people of the simplest tastes.² A glossator of the book of Amos describes the coming days as days when the reaper shall overtake the sower, when men shall eat and drink the fruit of their planting.³ It is somewhat remarkable that he does not describe the latter days as days when the fruits shall grow and be harvested of themselves. In the new heavens and the new earth of Isaiah the redeemed will build houses and live in them, eat what they have planted, and enjoy the work of their hands.⁴ Such passages indicate not only that it is man's destiny to work, but that he will never reach a point where this is no longer his destiny. And while the passage is not eschatological, we ought to mention Psalm 104.⁵ Here the poet sings of the way in which water and herbs are adapted to sustain the

¹ Sir 38, 25–34.

⁴ Isai 65, 17–22.

² Mic 4, 4.

⁵ Ps 104 (103), 10–23.

³ Amos 9, 13–15.

life of animals; they all conspire so that man may bring forth food from the earth, wine to gladden his heart, oil to make his face shine. And when the poet recalls the regular daily and seasonal movements of birds and animals, he ends the recital with man, who goes forth to his work at sunrise and labours until the evening.

In these passages one sees a new appreciation of work; it is not only man's destiny, it is more than necessary and useful. These writers, and we may assume it also for those for whom they wrote, were aware of the joy of work. The work of which they speak is not the work of the artist or the writer. Those who practise these skills know the strain and fatigue of this peculiar type of work, and they are sometimes annoyed when their friends take it for granted that they enjoy their work so much that they feel no strain and fatigue. But the joy of accomplishment in such works is rather obvious even to the uninitiated, and the joy of accomplishment makes the memory of fatigue grow dim. The biblical writers speak of that kind of work which most modern men, especially if they are urban, regard as back-breaking toil barely above the level of the galley-slave. They can never think of beatitude in terms of the peasant ideal. Even in modern literature there is not much awareness that the peasant can look at a field of ripe grain which he has planted and cultivated with a feeling not unlike the feeling of Michelangelo when he looked at the finished David. And just as the artist is sustained in his toil by the vision of that which he intends shall emerge, so the peasant is sustained in his toil by the vision of the earth bringing forth her richness under his hand. Were it not for his hand, the land would be that chaos which God did not make the earth to be; and if he feels that he has become a partner in God's work of creation, he would not feel anything unbiblical. He has in fact done his part to make the earth fit for human habitation. A programme of defoliation at this point in his life can be to him nothing but diabolical.

We have abstained from such modern terms as personal fulfilment, a term which the bible does not use, but I think we have the elements which are signified by this term. It is unfortunately true, as it was doubtless true in the ancient world, that not all who work know the joy of work. In many instances, like the peasant whose acres are defoliated, it is hardly their fault. They know the ancient enemies of man's work, the rebellion of nature and the hostility of other men. Without any personal failure their work is defeated; and he is a wise counsellor who can find a wise word for such. But this is not the

only feature of the modern curse of work. We may have cultivated leisure to excess, so much that the life of leisure becomes the good life simply, and men work only to reach the point where they can live leisurely and die more quickly of boredom than they ever would of overwork. The ancient greek ideal of leisure was leisure for what they knew as the liberal arts – and they thought of these arts as work. The man who did not employ leisure usefully was to them – and here the greeks were in substantial agreement with the israelites – a loafer, the man who is called in the parable the rich fool. Many of us find work defeating because we pursue a false ideal of leisure; and if we count this simply in terms of manhours lost, we might find that it is no inconsiderable element in the social problems of the modern world. If men do not find joy in work because it has never occurred to them that it is there to find, they will continue to believe that the only true joy of man in his short and miserable life under the sun is in not working. Mr Alfred Doolittle has already said it for them; and while Mr Doolittle – created by artists whom most people think were and are compulsive workers – does appear as a lovable character, he is hardly, in the words of Sirach, one of those who sustain the fabric of the world. If there is such a thing as a theology of work, we are certainly ready for it.