

# **FINANCIAL REMUNERATION IN THE SCRIPTURES**

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## **I. Introduction**

This study seeks to understand the connection between work and financial remuneration in the Bible in an attempt to identify basic biblical principles on financial remuneration that could be used today in the process of determining wages for church workers. We will begin by establishing the challenges that we confront in trying to achieve our goal based on the nature of the applicable biblical materials. That will be followed by a brief discussion of the biblical concept of work and its implication for financial remuneration. Next we will explore the biblical materials dealing with hiring practices and the determination of wages with the intent of defining their nature and theological basis. The study will close with a list of biblical principles drawn from the previous discussion of the biblical materials.

## **II. Limitations of the Biblical Materials Dealing with Wages**

A study of financial remuneration in the Bible, particularly in the Old Testament, confronts several challenges that we should take into consideration as we explore the usefulness of the biblical texts as a guidance for modern remuneration practices.

### **A. Prevailing Practices**

The biblical materials dealing with remuneration are in most cases descriptive of prevailing practices during biblical times. We can only suggest that if those practices were not condemned or criticized by the prophets they may have been considered to be valid. We also find cases where the Lord regulated common practices in order to protect the poor, the laborer, from

the greed and exploitation of the rich. Those regulations could help us to determine whether or not there was a serious concern in the Bible for just wages. But the cultural distance and structure of modern usage set some limits on applying the biblical practices to modern practices.

## B. Absence of Wage Scales

Surprisingly the legal materials found in the Bible are silent concerning the amount of wages to be paid for specific jobs and, perhaps more important, concerning how they were established. What makes it surprising is that we do have law collections from the ancient Near East where wages are stipulated for certain jobs. Let me illustrate it with a few examples. In a law collection dated to 2050-1800 B.C. (roughly the time of Abraham), it is established that, AIf a man [...-s and] a physician heals him, [he shall weigh and deliver] 5 shekels [of silver].<sup>1</sup>

Apparently payment was made only if the person was healed. In the Laws of Eshnunna (1770 B.C.) we find the following regulation of wages:

A7 20 silas of grain is the hire of a harvester; if (paid in) silver, 12 barleycorns is his hire.<sup>@</sup>

A8 10 silas of grain is the hire of a winnower.

A9A 15 silas is the hire of a sickle.<sup>@<sup>2</sup></sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Martha T. Roth, *Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1997), p. 37. The particular law collection from which we are quoting may have been part of the collection of laws called ALaws of Ur-Namma,<sup>@</sup> usually dated to 2100 B.C.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 60.

Having that information in the Old Testament would have been helpful to determine the ratio between a specific type of work and the wages paid. For instance, in the Laws of Eshnunna we read, **A14** The hire of a fuller, per one garment valued at 5 shekels of silver **B1** shekel is his hire; (per one garment) valued at 10 shekels of silver **B2** shekels is his hire.<sup>3</sup> The laborer is getting 20 percent of the value of the garment he is working on. That does not seem to be financially too bad for the laborer.

We do not know whether wages were regulated by law in Israel. The Bible is silent on that subject. There may not have been a centralized wages regulatory agency. As we will see, it appears that wages were commonly fixed through a process of negotiation between the landowner and the laborer.

### C. God's Ideal for His People

Finally, we comment on something that is not necessarily a challenge for us as we attempt to move from the biblical text to common practices today, but that is useful to keep in mind as we explore the biblical concept of wages. It seems that God's ideal for His people in the Old Testament was that they enjoy financial independence or self-sufficiency. In general, the patriarchs seem to have been financially independent and quite wealthy. In Egypt the twelve tribes lost their self-sufficiency and depended on the Egyptians to provide for their needs. However, the Lord had promised Abram, **A**But I will also judge the nation whom they will serve, and afterward they will come out with many possessions<sup>@</sup> (Gen. 15:14). Before leaving Egypt the Israelites, following God's instructions, **A**requested from the Egyptians articles of silver and

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 61.

articles of gold and clothing; and the Lord had given the people favor in the sight of the Egyptians, so that they let them have their request. Thus they plundered the Egyptians® (Exod. 12:35-36; cf. 3:21-22). It was God's intention for them to enjoy financial independence in the land of Canaan. Every Israelite family received from the Lord a piece of land, making them landowners. There was no need for them to work for others because they had the most fundamental symbol of financial self-sufficiency in an agrarian society, land and flocks. That divine gift, accompanied by the blessing of many children, was all they needed. The issue of wages was obviously not as important as it is today. But the ideal remained an ideal. Natural disasters and wars destroyed the fruits of the land, leaving behind many people with few financial resources. Some sold themselves into debt-slavery or had to work for others in order to provide for their own needs and those of their families. Then the question of proper or just wages was raised and became an important one. Consequently, we do find in the Bible enough information on the issue under consideration to allow us to draw some general principles that could be useful for the church today.

### III. Nature of Work, Wages, and the Employer-Employee Interdependence

Any discussion of wages in a Christian setting needs a conceptual frame of reference that flows out of the Scripture itself. We will suggest that the particular conceptual frame we are attempting to identify is located in the biblical theology of work. In the Scripture work is fundamentally good and indispensable for a meaningful life. God assigned it to humans before the fall (Gen. 1:26; 2:15), reaffirmed it after the fall (chap. 3:17-18), and it will continue after redemption (Isa. 65:21).

#### A. God as Worker

The significance of work in the Bible is directly connected to the fact that God works. In fact, the very first thing that the Bible says about God is that He works: "In the beginning God created . . ." (Gen. 1:1). He made, He built, He took the dust of the earth and made out of it something wonderful and beautiful, human beings. What He made brought joy to Him but He did it for the benefit and enjoyment of humans, the crown of His creation.

After the fall God was actively involved in a work of redemption and in the preservation of the world He created (Neh. 9:8; Col. 1:17). The most mysterious of His works was His incarnation. Everything Jesus did—His ministry, death on the cross, and resurrection—was done for the benefit of others, not to enrich Himself. The work of redemption fills Jesus' heart with joy (Isa. 53:14). That most glorious divine Worker stands before us as our Model, as the One who truly defines the very nature of human work.

## B. Human Work

Since divine work is essentially service to others, human work must be also seen in terms of service to others and ultimately to God. But human work has its limitations. It cannot mediate between God and humans and above all it cannot eradicate sin from the human experience or bring into existence a new creation.<sup>4</sup> That is the exclusive function of the work of Christ. Nevertheless, Christians are called to work, to serve one another (2 Thess. 3:6; Eph. 4:28); not even their eschatological hope should discourage them from working (1 Thess. 5:12).

But there is another side to this. Work itself has not escaped the damaging effects of sin.

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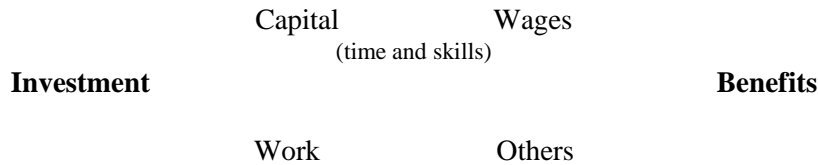
<sup>4</sup>P. A. Marshall, "Work," *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics & Pastoral Theology*, edited by David J. Atkinson and David H. Field (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), p. 899.

Although not a curse, work fell under the curse of sin (Gen. 3:17-19). Consequently, it has often been perceived and experienced as a heavy and difficult burden. Besides, we not only find and perform evil and wicked works, but human activity itself is possessed by a greed and selfishness that exploits our own work and that of others in order to satisfy our own egotistic concerns. But for those who have been redeemed from the curse of sin through Christ there is the possibility of viewing work from the proper biblical perspective. It is here that the true nature of work and the role of workers and their wages intersect with each other and may shed certain light on the way we should also look at wages.

### C. Work and Human Interdependence

Human interdependence should point us back to the true nature of work and wages. The investment of a person's skills, energy, and time (work) returns to him or her enrichment (wages) through what was done to benefit others. The person has capital (skills/energy and time) that can be transmuted into wages through a work of service to others. Through work time and energy are used to transform something into what others need—be it food, clothing, shelter, etc.—and it enriches the workers and their families in the sense that through their wages they contribute to the preservation of their lives. In other words, the life of a single unit, the individual, flows out to others, participates in the life of others, and contributes to their self-realization. We perceive in the circle of work the wholeness of an action that once initiated goes out to benefit others and comes back to benefit the worker. This is the true nature of Christian work and it is not limited to any particular profession but must characterize all. This circle of work can be illustrated as follows.

#### INDIVIDUAL



The interconnection between the landowner and the laborer was determined by the fact that they both had a need and that they depended on each other to satisfy their respective needs. In fact, by doing something to satisfy the need of the other one's personal need was also satisfied. The landowner needed to gather the harvest or lose it; the laborer needed wages to provide for his family. Serving the landowner meant that the landowner was going to provide for the laborers what they needed in the form of wages. One can detect here the principle of interdependence or mutual dependence. The exploitation of the laborer by the landowner or the ineffectiveness of the worker disrupted that dependence and resulted in a partial satisfaction of the needs of one of them. It is on that foundation that the call for just wages and effective work should be based. If the only motivation for work is wages we lose sight of the centrality of work as a task of service to others.

#### IV. Hiring Practices and Just Wages

Although God's intention for the Israelites was that they be financially independent, they probably had resident aliens working for them on the land for wages. But, as indicated above, some Israelites had to work for wages. In an agrarian society most of the work available was agricultural, like planting and harvesting and tending the flocks performed by both men and women (e.g. Ruth 2:2-4; Gen. 29:9; Exod. 2:16; Amos 3:12). But we also find other types of workers who had special skills and were employed or contracted for a period of time to perform a particular task. Among them we find goldsmiths (Isa. 46:6), potters (1 Chron. 4:12), linen-

makers (1 Chron. 4:21), perfumers (Neh. 3:8), charioteers (1 Chron. 19:6), masons, carpenters, workers of iron and bronze (2 Chron. 24:12), etc. In some cases mercenaries (Judges 9:7; 2 Sam. 10:6), and false prophets (Neh. 6:12) were employed. Laborers were paid with silver (Judges 17:10; 1 Chron. 19:6), food (Num. 18:31; 1 Kings 5:11), animals (Gen. 30:32; 31:7), clothes (Judges 17:10), spoils of war (Ezek. 29:19), special offerings (1 Chron. 24:1-12), tithe (Num. 18:31), and by the time of the New Testament money was used (Mark 14:6).

Since many of those workers were financially deprived, God was concerned for them and interested in protecting them from the abuse and oppression of the rich and powerful. Such divine concern is reflected in the Bible's interest on just wages and the prophetic calls to social reform. The prevailing labor practices were regulated by God in an effort to control human greed that could result in damages for both parties.

#### A. Fixing Wages

*Wages were often negotiated or agreed on by both parties.* The employer and the employee had a conversation and the wages were determined. Jacob decided to stay in Laban's home and to work for him. Immediately the negotiating process began. Laban said to him, "Just because you are a relative of mine, should you work for me for nothing? Tell me what your wages should be" (Gen. 29:15). Jacob indicated that he was in love with Rachel, that he did not have the required dowry, but that he was willing to work seven years for Laban, if he would accept that work as the equivalent of the dowry. This was agreed on by both parties. Solomon requested the services of laborers from Tyre, and determined the wages in dialogue with king Hiram (2 Chron. 2:10, 25; 1 Kings 5:6, 8, 10). In one of Jesus' parables the landowner went to hire men to work in his vineyard. "He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them

into his vineyard (Matt. 20:2). The contractual relationship was based on mutual trust and respect.

## B. Deceptive Wages

*Once the wages were established they could not be changed.* We can illustrate that practice by referring to cases where the agreement was violated. The contract was not always followed and that often resulted in the oppression of the laborer. Jacob accused Laban of changing his wages ten times in 20 years! However, he said-- God did not allow him [Laban] to harm me (Gen. 31:7). God took very seriously any violation of the agreement or contract. He was always ready, as Malachi said, to act against those who defraud laborers of their wages (Mal. 3:5). The Hebrew verb used by the prophet, *ashaq*, translated to defraud, describes an act that results in the exploitation or extortion of the individuals by, among other things, not giving them the proper wages agreed on. That type of abuse was in fact a threat to the life or well-being of a person. The Lord was totally opposed to the exploitation of the poor and pronounced a woe against those who practiced it (Jer. 22:13). Proverbs 11:18 seems to use the phrase *deceptive wages* to designate the practice of violating the wage agreement. The Hebrew verbal root (*shaqar*) means to deceive in the sense of to break faith, to act against contractual terms.

## C. Amount of Wages

*Wages were expected to cover more than the immediate needs of the person.* Most laborers lived from hand to mouth, making it necessary for the landowners to pay them immediately at the end of the day. But the ideal seems to have been to provide for the laborers more than they needed to take care of their immediate needs. In the parable of the Prodigal Son,

the son who was away from home earning very little, not even enough to satisfy his hunger, said to himself, "How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death!" (Luke 15:17). The owner of the house provided for his hired workers more food than they needed to satisfy their present condition. Paul received from the Philippians an offering that was much more than he needed: "I have received everything in full and have an abundance; I am amply supplied" (4:10: NASB).

Laban, in spite of his violation of the wages agreement, provided food and shelter for Jacob and included in his salary certain number of animals that became a small capital for Jacob (Gen. 30:31-34; 31:17-18). The story of the Levite who was employed by Micah during the time of the judges illustrates this same concept. Micah offered him a job as his private family priest and the wages were agreed on. The Levite was to receive the following things as his wages: Food, clothes, shelter, and 10 shekels of silver a year (Judges 17:10),<sup>5</sup> a relatively good arrangement that provided for present and future needs and enticed the Levite to stay. Later on representatives from the tribe of Dan offered him a better job and the Levite left Micah and went with them (chap. 18:19-20). The story suggests that wages varied based on the present and future needs of the employer and the skills of the worker (cf. 1 Cor. 3:8). Different wages for the same

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<sup>5</sup>A silver shekel was about 8.6 grams. In ancient Babylon 15 shekels equaled 2 tons of grain (see, John W. Betlyon, "Coinage," *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 1, edited by David Noel Freedman [New York: Doubleday, 1992], p. 1078). Ten shekels a year was not much, but the fact that the wages included other benefits made the offer significantly attractive to the unemployed Levite.

work were a source of tensions and conflicts (cf. Matt. 20:12).

The income of priests and Levites was determined by the willingness of the people to return their tithe to the Lord (Num. 18:31). Whenever the people were faithful to the Lord the Levites and priests probably received good wages that provided for immediate and future needs. Those who were employed to repair the temple were paid from a special offering destined to the temple. It covered the rebuilding expenses and the wages of the laborers. If there was a surplus it was not used for a salary increase but was sent to the temple treasury (1 Chron. 24:1-12). Concerning salary increases the only statement we have comes from John the Baptist in Luke 3:14: *Be content with your pay.* He is advising against increase of wages through unethical or immoral means which would have been the result of or that could have resulted in the abuse or extortion of others. Paul suggests that the elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching (1 Tim. 5:17). *Double honor* has been interpreted by some as meaning double salary, but the Greek word *time* does not mean salary but *respect, compensation, honorarium.* Here it designates an honor expressed in some type of tangible financial gift, as suggested by verse 18.<sup>6</sup>

#### D. Duty of the Workers

*It was the responsibility of the workers to invest themselves *in their time and energy* in the work that needed to be done. Wages were earned, and in order to receive them a laborer was*

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<sup>6</sup>The historical evidence suggests that the practice of a paid *clergy* in the Christian church began after the second century; see I. Howard Marshall, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), pp. 612-614.

expected to perform and to *put in his time* (Job 14:6). In Old Testament times workers went out early in the morning and ended the day's work near the evening (Ps. 104:23). They were investing their energy and time in productive work (cf. Isa. 49:4). Obviously the main motivating force for that display of commitment to a task was the wages. Job describes the hired man as *Awaiting eagerly for his wages* (Job 7:2). The verb used there (*qaweh*, *to wait*) means *to await, to hope*, and puts the emphasis on the target of the hope, which, in this particular context, is the earned wages. Yet, the biblical ideal seems to go beyond that correct motivation for work to a higher one that, as we indicated above, is related to the biblical understanding of work. Workers were expected to care deeply for the task they were performing, to commit themselves to it in order to do their very best. This concern is implicitly present in Jesus' description of the relationship between the sheep and the shepherd. He invited his listeners to observe the hired man whose main concern was his wages. He sees the wolf coming and runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep (John 10:13; cf. Jer 23:1). This lack of genuine commitment to the task for which the person was being paid was in a sense a breach of the contract. Those who were working for the Lord were expected to place Him in first place. The Jews who after the exile returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple were reprimanded by the Lord for giving priority to their own personal needs and not to rebuilding the temple (Haggai 1:5-9).

#### E. Wages and the Personal Value

*Workers were worthy of their wages.* In the Bible the dignity of a person was not lost by the simple fact that they were laborers. The wages served to affirm that dignity by acknowledging the value and usefulness of human skills in the work done. Jesus encapsulated that idea in the

succinct statement: "The worker deserves his wages" (Luke 10:7; cf. 1 Tim. 5:18). The phrase "deserves his wages" indicates that a service was performed and that it was ethically, morally, and spiritually right to recognize it through proper wages. They were not a gift but the result of productive service rendered (cf. Rom. 4:4). Exploitation of laborers was very often the result of depreciating their value as humans. Consequently the Lord said to the wealthy and powerful, "Woe to him who builds his palace by unrighteousness, his upper rooms by injustice, making his countrymen work for nothing, not paying them for their labor" (Jer. 22:13; cf. James 5:4). For them humans became a means to achieve their selfish purposes, but the Lord was not willing to overlook that sin. Similarly God said to the Israelites, "Do not hold back the wages of a hired man overnight" (Lev. 19:13b); "Do not take advantage of the hired man who is poor and needy. . . Pay him his wages each day before sunset, because he is poor and is counting on it" (Deut. 24:14-15). The landowner was expected by God Himself to treat the laborers with respect and concern for their well-beings and this was to be reflected in paying promptly their right wages.

## V. Principles

Having reviewed the biblical materials dealing with work and wages, we should now note principles that are still valid for the church as it seeks to define just wages for its workers. Due to the challenges that we confront in the study of the biblical materials on the subject of wages we have been able to identify only a limited number of principles.

### A. Wages Should be Based on a Mutual Agreement.

A dialogue between the employer and the future employee that will lead to an agreement on the wages to be received is indispensable in order to create a state of mutual satisfaction.

Workers should leave the dialogue with the conviction that the contribution they will make to

satisfy the needs and plans of the church is properly recognized through just wages. This will contribute, as the Bible suggests, to the reaffirmation of the dignity and value of the worker.

#### B. Wages Should Provide for Immediate and Some Future Needs of the Workers.

This is possibly the principle most difficult for the church to implement in our modern society. Needs tend to vary from individual to individual and the amount of money needed to satisfy them is variable in a world economy controlled by the demands and exigencies of a fluctuating market. Here a sincere concern for workers, as suggested by the biblical theology of work, must prevail in the process of determining wages. Just wages require that the immediate needs of workers be taken into serious consideration *within the economic and social conditions in which they live*. This introduces into the equation a type of objective control against the ever-present threat and temptation to exploiting laborers. The amount of wages should also be enough to provide for future needs. We should remember that God's intention for His people was that they be financially self-sufficient. Wages should anticipate and provide for the reality that at some point in their lives workers will not have or will not be able to work for wages. By providing for that eventuality the church reflects the love and concern of God for workers.

#### C. The Type of Work and the Skills of the Workers Should be Taken into Consideration.

Just wages would require that before establishing the earnings of workers their skills and the level of responsibility expected from them should be taken into consideration. In ancient Israel priests and Levites were better paid than field laborers. On what ground was that determined? The Bible does not say. What was the intention of the differences in wages? In the case of priests and Levites it was done in order for them to dedicate their full energy and time to the work the Lord assigned them on behalf of the people. The same would have probably applied

to the king and those working in the palace. The difference in wages did not have the purpose of feeding their natural greed; it was intended to make their ministry or work on behalf of others more effective by releasing them from the burden of having to find other means of subsistence.

The principle under discussion implies the existence of a wage scale that would take into consideration not only the nature of the work to be done and the skills of the workers but also their present and future needs as discussed above. On what grounds is that scale to be established? The Bible does not provide specific suggestion on how that should be done but in a sense it alerts us to certain dangers. The fact that the Bible condemns greed, selfishness, and the exploitation of workers or the poor would imply that a wage scale should not be governed explicitly, implicitly, or indirectly by an economic philosophy that tends to promote those elements.

Therefore, it is both inappropriate and dangerous for the church to use as a model for wages the salary distinctions produced by economic practices from the secular world, be they from the private or public sector. Most of those salary scales are based on a philosophy of work that is incompatible with the biblical understanding of the nature of work. They could strengthen human greed and result in the exploitation of the poor. The modern understanding of work tends to assign to it a salvific role. It is almost an idol. Through work, it is said, humans can obtain acceptance, recognition, influence, and create a self-fulfilling future. The goal of work is not service but productivity that leads to leisure, escape from work. Using salary scales from those sources could imply support for the philosophy that undergirds them. The church cannot afford to do that. Hence, it should prayerfully and carefully study the issue, taking into consideration the principles discussed above, showing sincere concern for workers and their families and using the

resources the Lord has provided through tithe and offerings conscientiously, graciously, and lovingly.

#### D. Wages Should be Accompanied by Productivity.

Workers should be expected to supply in an effective way for the needs of the church for which they are responsible. They should earn their wages. The biblical understanding of the relationship between work and salary should govern the disposition of workers as they fulfil their work. The Bible expects from them complete and full commitment to the work of the church--preaching, ministry, administration--and that commitment should be the motivating force in their work. When fulfilling that commitment their needs should be properly cared for by the church. Since the primary focus of workers should be their mission, greed must not become a ruling power in their lives. This attitude facilitates the difficult work of the church in determining wages and formulating salary scales.

### VI. Conclusion

The Bible provides us some general guidelines that can be used in the process of determining salary remuneration. This paper has explored and identified some of them. But possibly the most important element in this subject is the need to use the biblical perspective and understanding of work as a way of serving others (mutual service in the Lord). This understanding is not common in the societies in which we live and work but should be the prevailing one within the church. The spirit of service and self-sacrifice that characterized the work and life of Jesus should also characterize church administrators and workers. We must be willing through our respective jobs to serve each other and together to serve the church in the fulfilment of its mission. It is in that process that our own needs will be taken care of, liberating

us to service. The total commitment of workers to the task assigned them by the Lord should be paralleled by the commitment of church administrators to ensure that proper and gracious provision is made for their present and future needs.

*February 2001*

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