New Testament

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Abstract

The New Testament of the Bible launched into the Western world an entirely new concept of ‘work’: it was no longer the arduous thing that the Hellenic philosophers had wanted to avoid, nor was it merely the Hebraic God’s creative act or the Jewish observance of the law: it was now God’s saving act. God’s work made man’s work of only secondary significance. Everyone is familiar with the Pauline and Lutheran doctrine of a distinction between ‘justification by faith’ and ‘justification by works’. But no such distinction is possible when we consider the full range of meanings of work in the New Testament. There are many words for ‘work’ in the New Testament: not only *ergon*, work in the sense of effective act, but also *kopos*, work in the sense of burdensome act, and *ponos*, work in the sense of painful act; and not only these still relatively straightforward terms, but also the related and importantly contrasted words *praxis* and *poiesis* (the origins of our words for ‘practice’ and ‘poetry’) and words for specific and significant works: healings, miracles, signs, even resurrection. Work is no simply category in the Bible, and cannot be: because there is a continual leaping over of the levels from earthly to heavenly. Therefore, the New Testament contains much matter about ordinary work, in the sense of toil, but also discusses the messianic and apostolic work of healing and preaching, and, finally, it recognises the work of God the Father in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. By ‘faith’ the Christian tradition did not disparage work: on the contrary, it asked Christians to trust in work, the work of God.

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Christianity is not well understood, not even in Christian countries. Everyone knows that Christianity is a religion of God, a monotheism: not a polytheistic religion, or an atheistic religion. But this tells us hardly anything distinctive. To put it at its most simplest, Christianity is distinct from all other religions, and especially Judaism and Islam, in three ways.

First, it involves the most emphatic intervention of God in history: not in the form of law, or proclamation, or truth, but in the form of a man who was the ‘word made flesh’, who not only uttered the *logos* but was the *logos*: the intervention of a man who was the Son of God. This religion is radically historical: it concerns a historical event: it brings to consciousness a historical sensibility, since something happened in the past and we await its consequences.

Second, it rejects, or sublates, the older religion of law: so that salvation is not secured by acts or works but through faith. This does not mean works are not important: but their importance is relative to faith, where faith is a form of response to the intervention of God in history: it is manifest first in an attitude of will or an incorporation of spirit and then in works. We are told to love God and love others. This is an intensification of the requirements of religion: it is no longer enough to observe the law. Hypocrisy becomes a sin. But this adjustment also means that Christianity is not simply a political religion: it is a religion which is ambivalent about earthly human orders.

Third, it involves an apparently paradoxical diremption of God, so that God exists as Father, as Son and as Spirit. Philosophically, this enables Christians to hold onto ‘the one and the many’ at the same time: for God is internally articulated, is a self-differentiating entity—as far as creation is concerned—just as creation is. It is this internal diremption of God which is the ultimate *skandalon* or stumbling-block: the thing which is absurd.

This threefold account enables me to say at the outset that work is something but not everything in Christianity. Its importance is secondary. Christianity is not a religion of law: it is a religion of love; it is not a religion of works: it is a religion of faith. It is not a religion which is supposed to be manifested externally in objective acts: it is supposed to be manifested internally in a subjective attitude: an alteration of the will.

In the beginning, God worked, then he rested. Then, every man and woman worked. (‘When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?’) Then there was government. ‘The invention of the man who did no work with his hands… was nothing less than the invention of government’.[[1]](#endnote-1) Hesiod in *Works and Days* argued that there were two forms of strife, *eris*, one found in war, the other in work.[[2]](#endnote-2) And even in the time of Jesus *eritheia* meant ‘labour for wages’, though it also meant political intrigue. Work has always been taunted by the existence of those who did not need to work, and tainted by the suffering of those who did. Most accounts of work, therefore, have made sense of it in relation to something else. The ancients distinguished *otium* and *negotium*. Arendt distinguished work from labour and action. Oakeshott distinguished it from play. Many others have distinguished it from rest. I would like to venture two general hypotheses about the status of work in human thought. The first hypothesis is that any significant theory of work is usually a theory of its difference from something else. The second hypothesis is that work is usually the lesser of two opposed things. Any theory of work, if it is a theory, is, usually, a theory of what work is not, and is in fact a theory of something else. In the New Testament the emphasis is on faith and not on work. But it is important not to overstate this: it is better to say that the emphasis is on faith, and that work, and works, are understood in relation to faith.

There is much general ambiguity about work. Work is a word for *something we do* and also sometimes *the effect of that something we do*, a ‘work’: that latter can be pluralised into ‘works’. Moreover, work is a word, or set of words, which in the New Testament can refer to many things: pain, hardship, struggle, trouble, bother, toil, labour, craft, achievement, benefices, charitable activity, miracles and creation. It runs from suffering through ordinary labour and the arts, and then through good acts, to God’s creation and his redeeming activity through the atonement for our sins in the crucifixion of his Son.[[3]](#endnote-3) The most important word for work is *ergon* and its derivatives, and I shall mostly be concerned with this. But in a second category there are other words for work, such as *kopos* and *ponos*. These nouns express an interesting sequence: *ergon* means work or task, without implying any particular value, mere ‘work’, while *kopos* means work, trouble, hardship, bother, struggle, toil, all words we usually mean by ‘labour’, while *ponos* also means work and toil, hence affliction and suffering, but its meaning extends as far as pain: there is a relation between the Greek *ponos*, the Latin *poena*, the French *pein* and the English pain. In a third category, there are other related words such as *praxis* and *poiesis*. The Acts of the Apostles is a translation of *Praxeis Apostolon*, and states its first concern as being what Jesus started to do, *poiein*, and to teach.[[4]](#endnote-4) In the same way the gospel of Luke opens with the claim that it is a statement of the *pragmata* or facts, things done. The word *praxis* is the root of the English word ‘practice’, while the word *poiesis* is the root of the English word ‘poetry’: both are concerned with work, though the first word emphasises the activity associated with work whereas the second emphasises the artefact created by that work.

Nonetheless the most important word here is *ergon*. This is a remarkable word, and it is used remarkably in the New Testament. It has many derivative terms. An *ergon* is a work, and pluralised as *erga* refers to works; and *ergon* is also work without the indefinite article, summing together in a singular many works. There are related words like *ergasia*, employment, *ergates*, worker, and the two verbs *energeo* and *ergazomia*. The verbs mean ‘to work’ when intransitive, and ‘bring about or achieve something’ when transitive. Associated with the verb *energeo* is the noun *energeia*—the ancestor of our word ‘energy’—which means a form of power which works, which is effective in its action. Indeed, *energes* means ‘effective’. We are in a world in which Christ has the power to subject everything to himself.

There is also the word *argos*, which is a compound of the negative suffix *a-* and *ergos*: so meaning ‘inactive’, or literally ‘not working’. And one of the most beguiling words in the New Testament is derived from *ergon*. Thisis the strange word *katargeo*. The word *kata* is common in the New Testament. It means ‘through’ or ‘according to’ but suggests entirety because the implication that action is bestowed down from a higher position: everything is subject to something higher.[[5]](#endnote-5) The suffix *kata-* is also associated with downward movement. (Contrast *ana-* which is associated with upward movement: in, for instance, *anastasis* or ‘resurrection’, literally ‘standing up’.) The word *katargeo* is therefore a compound of two negative suffixes *kata* and *a*, and *ergon*: and it is this double negative which might explain why the word is so enigmatic. I shall return to this below. But we should not that even this does not exhaust the subject. The word *leitourgia*, which still exists in the English form ‘liturgy’, is also derived from *ergon*: its original meaning was ‘work for the people’ (from *leitos*, people, and *ergon*), but it came to mean ‘service’ in the special sense of worship.[[6]](#endnote-6) Paul spoke of himself as *leitourgos Christou Iesuo eis ta ethne*, the public servant of Jesus Christ to the nations.[[7]](#endnote-7)

The language of the New Testament is Greek. As everyone knows, in the *Septuagint* Hebrew meanings had been translated into the language of Plato. It is possible that Jesus himself, who came from hellenised Galilee, spoke Greek, as well as Hebrew and Aramaic.[[8]](#endnote-8) So it is worth considering the ancestry and status of some of the fundamental words that were twisted into a new system by the Christians. In Greek much was made of two fundamental words *logos* and *ergon*. A *logos* was a word or a thought or a truth. It was arguably the fundamental word of all philosophy: it stood for, as Heraclitus suggested, the possibility of a higher and singular understanding of all the variety visible in the world. Its original meaning was one of collection or counting. If *logos* was the fundamental word of philosophy, then *ergon* was the fundamental word of history, yet another invention of the Greeks. History was the study of *erga*. It has been argued that for Thucydides history was the ironic study of the tragic failure of *ergon* to match *logos*.[[9]](#endnote-9) Every since the ancient world there has been a conundrum about how to relate history and philosophy. Some supposed that history was philosophy teaching by examples, so that example could become precept. Sir Philip Sidney thought that history and philosophy, or examples and precepts, could not be reconciled. Hegel later thought that he could reconcile them: but Hegel’s thought was suffused by Christian, and trinitarian, conceptions.

It was theology that enabled *logos* and *ergon* to be reconciled: since, for the first time, in Christ *logos* was *ergon*. The absolute background was creation, *ktisis*,the original work of God. On the seventh day ‘God ended his work [*erga*]’: ‘he rested on the seventh day from all his workwhich he had made’.[[10]](#endnote-10) John famously began his gospel by saying that in the beginning was the word, *logos*: but the ‘word became flesh’ [*logos sarx egeneto*].[[11]](#endnote-11) And Paul related creation to *logos*, saying that anyone who was in Christ was a *kaine ktisis*, a ‘new creature’.[[12]](#endnote-12) Jesus was famous both for *logoi*, teachings, and *erga*, miracles. But he was the incarnated *logos*, who was crucified, and then resurrected. Christianity is the religion of a response to this sequence of strange events, the oddity of incarnation, the apparent disaster of crucifixion, and the apparent victory of resurrection: which twisted the crucifixion around so that it was not defeat but a decisive act or *ergon* of God. In short, the good news of the New Testament was that the *logos* is the *ergon* of God.

Since ‘work’ is something which may be done by God or by man, it extends, therefore, from creation and salvation, experiencing the works of God, through experience of work, to suffering from one’s own work and the works or acts of other men. And, if this were not enough, as a middle term, there is the saving work of Jesus Christ, who—in a phrase used more than once in the gospel of John—‘works the work of God’. The meaning of ‘work’ in the New Testament does not take the form of a theory, but exists within a variety of meanings all of which acquire significance in relation to the revelation of Christ. In what follows, in order to show the different ways that work was seen in the New Testament I shall consider first the gospel of John, second the epistles of Paul, and third the epistle of James and the epistle to the Hebrews.

The gospel of John makes it evident that Jesus is continuing the work of God. The works of Jesus are not only works, but signs—*semeia* (the origin of the word ‘semiotics’)—because they are also the works of God.[[13]](#endnote-13) Jesus is criticised by the Jews for working on the Sabbath.[[14]](#endnote-14) This is significant, since God rested from work on the seventh day.

But Jesus answered them, My Father worketh [*ergazetai*]hitherto, and I work[*ergazomai*]. Therefore the Jews sought the more to kill him, because he not only had broken the sabbath, but said also that God was his Father, making himself equal with God. Then answered Jesus and said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, The Son can do nothing of himself, but what he seeth the Father do: for what things soever he doeth, these also doeth the Son likewise. For the Father loveth the Son, and sheweth him all things that himself doeth: and he will shew him greater works [*erga*] than these, that ye may marvel.[[15]](#endnote-15)

It is through works that Jesus demonstrates his equality with God. And it is this which points to the crucifixion. ‘And therefore did the Jews persecute Jesus, and sought to slay him, because he had done these things on the sabbath day.’[[16]](#endnote-16)

Jesus often uses circular expressions to make the point that he is doing the work of God. ‘I must work the works of him that sent me, while it is day: the night cometh, when no man can work.’[[17]](#endnote-17) Here the phrase is a doublet, *ergazesthai ta erga*. And we find circularity again when the disciples ask him how they ‘might work the works of God?’ Here the phrase is another doublet, *ergazometha ta erga*. But the answer of Jesus escapes the circle by pointing to the necessity of faith. ‘Jesus answered and said unto them, This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent.’ [[18]](#endnote-18) If the followers believe in Jesus, then they are doing the work of God. So here the suggestion is that the ultimate work is faith. The followers do not take this on trust: they still ask for signs. ‘What sign shewest thou then, that we may see, and believe thee? what dost thou work?’[[19]](#endnote-19) And this is the circularity of the followers: they need to see works, or signs, in order to believe, and then, if they believe, they can do God’s work. God’s work, therefore, exists on three levels: as God’s work, as the signs evident in the works of Jesus, and in the works of man which takes the form of faith.

One important work is the verb ‘to follow’, *akoloutheo*. At the beginning of the gospel of John, Jesus summons Philip by saying ‘Follow me’, and at the end of the same gospel, he says the same words to Peter, ‘Follow me’.[[20]](#endnote-20) In the middle of the gospel, Thomas says: ‘Lord, we do know not whither thou goest; and how can we know thy way?’ Jesus replies to him, ‘I am the way the truth and the life’: *Ego eimi he hodos kai he aletheia kai he zoon*: ‘no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.’[[21]](#endnote-21) Since Jesus is with his followers for only a ‘little longer’, he adds that the *parakletos*, the advocate or comforter, explained as the Holy Spirit, will ‘bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you’.[[22]](#endnote-22) Throughout the logic is as follows: first faith, then love, then works. One has to have faith in Jesus—faith that he is doing God’s work—and then one has to obey the commandment ‘that ye also love one another’.[[23]](#endnote-23)

At the feast of dedication in winter, Jesus is at the temple in Solomon’s porch. The Jews say, ‘If you are Christ tell us plainly’. Jesus answers them, ‘I tell you, and ye believed not; the works that I do in my Father’s name, they bear witness of me…’ And: ‘I and my Father are one.’[[24]](#endnote-24) The Jews take up stones to stone him. Then Jesus says: ‘Many good works have I shewed you from my Father; for which of those works do ye stone me?’ The Jews answer him, saying, ‘For a good work, we stone thee not; but for blasphemy; and because that thou, being a man, makest thouself God.’[[25]](#endnote-25) And Jesus repeats the entire logic of his activity. ‘If I do not the works of my Father, believe me not. But if I do, though ye believe not me, believe the works: that ye may know, and believe, that the Father is in me, and I in him.’[[26]](#endnote-26)

Everything in the gospel of John concerns this circle of works, and the extension of the circle to take in faith. Everything is about *pistis* and *ergon*. It is because Jesus does the works of God that he should be believed. The following is part of his explanation to Thomas:

Believest thou not that I am in the Father, and the Father in me? the words that I speak unto you I speak not of myself: but the Father that dwelleth in me, he doeth the works. Believe me that I am in the Father, and the Father in me: or else believe me for the very works’ sake. Verily, verily, I say unto you, he that believeth on me, the works that do shall he do also; and greater works then these shall he do, because unto my Father.[[27]](#endnote-27)

And, as the end approaches, Jesus offers a prayer to God: ‘I have glorified thee on the earth: I have finished the work [*ergon*]which thou gavest me to do.’[[28]](#endnote-28)

The epistles of Paul were written before the Gospels, but logically they are subsequent to them. In the gospel of John, Jesus is present, explaining himself; but in the epistles of Paul Jesus is absent, so that Jesus-working-the-work-of-God is no longer exemplary. We are now in the world after the resurrection, the world of the Holy Spirit, after Pentecost. And since Jesus made a maximum claim about his own identity with God, what is now required—fatally for the history of Christianity—theology is required. Paul is, in fact, the first theologian, an even earlier theologian than John, the author of the fourth gospel. Not only this. In the twentieth century Oakeshott called Paul ‘perhaps the greatest political philosopher’.[[29]](#endnote-29) For what would Augustine have been without Paul, or Luther, or Kierkegaard, or Barth? Now, whereas John sought to explain faith in relation to work, Paul was more inclined to distinguish faith and work. Whereas John uses *akoloutheo*, ‘follow’, Paul uses a different word *mimeomai*, ‘imitate’. And as the *apostolos* of Christ, Paul now suggests that we imitate him. ‘Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ’, says Paul in the King James Version: but the word is *mimetai*, ‘imitators’, not ‘followers’.[[30]](#endnote-30) In relation to work, John is the great unifier, and Paul is the great separator.

Paul distinguishes perhaps three distinctive sorts of work or works in an ascending scale. The first are the obvious manifestations of sin, the ‘works of the flesh’; the second is the more subtle and hidden manifestations of sin, ‘the works of the law’, while the third sort of work is that which is carried out by those of us who live neither by the ‘works of the flesh’ nor the ‘works of the law’, but by the ‘law of faith’: these works are secondary to faith. The works of the flesh are obvious sin. In the epistle to the Galatians Paul writes: ‘Now the works of the flesh [*erga tes sarkos*] are manifest, which are these: Adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like: of which I till you before, as I have also told you in time past, that they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God.’[[31]](#endnote-31) The works of the flesh are contrasted with *karpos tou pneumatos*, ‘fruit of the Spirit’.[[32]](#endnote-32)

The works of the law are much less obvious forms of sin. In fact, in the old religion they are not sin at all, but salvation. The originality of Paul was in making this argument. Early on in the epistle to the Romans he contrasts every man that ‘doeth evil’, *katergazomenou to kakon*, and every man ‘that worketh good’, *ergazomenó to agathon*.[[33]](#endnote-33) It is the latter who will be justified. But the argument should not be misunderstood. He goes on to say that ‘both Jews and Gentiles… are all under sin’.[[34]](#endnote-34) And so the argument is subtler: it is that, no matter how one works, ‘there is none righteous: no, not one’.[[35]](#endnote-35) What matters is faith, not works as such. The ‘deeds of the law’ (the ‘works of the law’ in the Revised Version), *ergon nomou*, are not enough to enable one to be justified or made righteous.[[36]](#endnote-36) No one can be righteous by the works of the law, for ‘all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God’.[[37]](#endnote-37) The reason for this is the famous argument in the epistle to the Galatians that ‘by the law is the knowledge of sin’.[[38]](#endnote-38) This negative picture of law is reversed or seen more dialectically in the epistle to the Romans where ‘love is the fulfilling of the law’.[[39]](#endnote-39) This reversal has led theologians into much consideration; but the relevance here is that, either way, ‘the works of the law’ without faith or love avail us of nothing.

The third stage, above the obviously sinful ‘works of the flesh’ and the boastful but hypocritical ‘works of the law’, is the ‘law of faith’. This stage is not directly concerned with work at all, since the entire point is that faith is a receptive attitude of will, a trust, which does not depend on independent human will but involves admitting dependence on God’s will. What we require is—and the argument seems to be double here—both God’s grace as manifest ‘through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus’ and an equal and opposite faith in the same: ‘a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins…’[[40]](#endnote-40) Paul distinguishes *ergon nomou* and *nomou pisteos*, works of law and law of faith.[[41]](#endnote-41) He addresses the Jew ‘who restest in the law, and maketh thy boast of God’ and after the long argument concludes: ‘Where is boasting then? It is excluded.’[[42]](#endnote-42) He then brings the argument to its end: ‘A man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law’.[[43]](#endnote-43) This is antithesis, not dialectic: the distinction of being justified by works, *ex ergon edikaiothe*, and justified by faith, *dikaiothentes ek pisteos*, is to clarify that only the latter is necessary.[[44]](#endnote-44)

However, at this third stage, work is indirectly relevant, since Paul then has to consider what is required by way of work from those who have faith—even if they should not suppose that they are justified by works. This is where we come to the ordinary meaning of work. Paul calls no fewer than sixteen people *synergoi* or fellow workers, including Timothy, Titus and Barnabus.[[45]](#endnote-45) ‘We are labourers together with God’, has the King James Version, but the Greek is *synergoi theou*.[[46]](#endnote-46) Again, as in the gospel of John, there is the circular phrase. Paul writes that Timothy ‘worketh the work [*ergon*] of the Lord, as I also do’.[[47]](#endnote-47) The work of Christ usually called *ergon*, but there is also much ordinary labour. Sometimes *kopos* is used as if it is the equivalent of *ergon*,[[48]](#endnote-48) though Paul tends to use the word *kopos* to stand for the work he does to provide for himself, so that he is not a burden to the churches.[[49]](#endnote-49) Paul talks much the labour of others for him,[[50]](#endnote-50) and the labour of him for others.[[51]](#endnote-51)

Despite the antithesis between work and faith in the epistles of Paul, the language of work is still used when he writes of faith. In the epistle to the Galatians he writes of the ‘faith which worketh through love’, *pistis di agapes energoumene*.[[52]](#endnote-52) In the first epistle to the Corinthians he writes, also famously: ‘And now abideth faith, hope, charity; but the greatest of these is charity’:[[53]](#endnote-53) ‘charity’ being the King James Version translation of *agape*. Usually *agape* is love, but ‘charity’ is also work: is what Kierkegaard called a ‘work of love’. At times Paul clearly considers *ergon* to be better than *logos*. In the second epistle to the Corinthians Paul says that he is *logos* in his letters when he is absent but is in *ergon* when present.[[54]](#endnote-54) This resembles the first epistle of John where it is said that we should love not in word or tongue but in deed and truth: not in *logos* but in *ergon* and *aletheia*.[[55]](#endnote-55) Here, again, we find the reversal of the classical Greek preference for *logos* over *ergon*. The *logos* is fundamental, but it is nothing without *ergon*.

The epistle of James is short, but long enough to state the other side. This gospel was disliked by Luther, who thought it should be removed from the Bible. James explains that faith and works go together. His argument was that faith was worthless without works. ‘Faith [*pistis*], if it hath not works [*erga*], is dead, being alone.’[[56]](#endnote-56) And perhaps even more pointedly, since James reversed the usual metaphor: ‘For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.’[[57]](#endnote-57) James is usually taken to have been the head of the church in Jerusalem, and hence eager not to exaggerate the division between the new faith and the old law.

The apparent contradictions of the New Testament are a consequence of the gap between outward and inward righteousness—and the fact that a work could be a proof of both. Jesus says in the gospel of Matthew: ‘Ye… outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.’[[58]](#endnote-58) This explains the formulas of the Sermon of the Mount, where Jesus says, repeatedly, ‘You have heard that it was said… but I say unto you’. And in the well-known sentence: ‘Think not that I have come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am come not to destroy but to fulfil.’[[59]](#endnote-59) On one side, as sometimes in Paul, faith is antithetical to works, and hence law, while, elsewhere, faith is manifest in works, and so faith is not antithetical to law but enables the law to be realised.

It is probably here that it is necessary to mention the remarkable word *katargeo*. The word *katargeo*, usually meaning ‘to destroy’ and literally something like ‘to render ineffective’, is ambiguous: it can also mean ‘free someone from something’; and, in the passive, it means to be deprived of power or to be separated. The word describes the power of God to remove power from other things, including from sin, and even from law. As I mentioned above, the word is derived from *argos* which means *a-ergos*, that is, idle, inactive or ineffective, with *kata*- being the ambiguous prefix, with sometimes a downwards signification. The word is therefore related to work. One scholar has suggested that we should understand it supernaturally as referring to exorcism: *energeo* meaning to be suffused with divine spirit, and *katargeo* meaning to be separated from demonic spirit.[[60]](#endnote-60) Sometimes it appears to have a simple meaning, as when in the first epistle to the Corinthians Paul suggests that Christ hands over the kingdom to God after he *katargese*—makes ineffective, brought to nothing, destroyed—all rule (*arche*), authority (*exousias*), power (*dynamis*).[[61]](#endnote-61) Georgio Agamben notes that in the Septuagint *argeo* was used for rest on the Sabbath: ‘It is certainly not by chance that the term used by the apostle to express the effect of the messianic on works of the law echoes a verb that signifies the sabbatical suspension of works.’[[62]](#endnote-62) Paul says in the epistle to the Romans that we are now *katergethemen* from the law—liberated from the law by having its work destroyed in us[[63]](#endnote-63)—and Agamben says that this was taken to be both positive and negative. He then notes that Luther translated this this *Aufheben*, ‘the very word that harbours the double meaning of abolishing and conserving (*aubewahren* and *aufhören lassen*) used by Hegel as a foundation for his dialectic’.[[64]](#endnote-64)

There is one more twist. It is found in the epistle to the Hebrews where the distinction of work and rest is used as an analogy for life on this earth and life in the kingdom of God. The writer of the epistle suggests that those who do not have faith cannot ‘enter into his rest’.[[65]](#endnote-65) ‘For we which have believed do enter into rest, as he said, As I have sworn in my wrath, if they shall enter into my rest: although the works were finished form the foundation of the world.’[[66]](#endnote-66) The writer declares that anyone who enters his rest, ‘hath also ceased from his own works, as God did from his. Let us labour therefore to enter that rest’.[[67]](#endnote-67) This echoes the word of Jesus in the gospel of Matthew: ‘Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give thee rest.’[[68]](#endnote-68)

According to John, Jesus works the work of God, and we should follow him. And to follow him is to have faith. According to Paul, one cannot expect to be justified by works; we are justified by faith: though our faith will then be shown in works. According to James, and here we come full circle, faith is nothing without works. The epistle to the Hebrews, attributed to Paul, completes the thought, with reference back to the Psalms and Genesis, by saying that having had faith our work shall cease when we enter the rest of God. We are caught in circles. Jesus works the work of God; Paul, as *apostolos*, works the works of Jesus; and we, in imitation, should work the works of Paul, or John, or Peter, or James.

The argument, as a whole, appears to be that God judges us by our works. ‘The Father… without respect of persons judgeth according to every man’s work…’[[69]](#endnote-69) And: ‘Every man’s work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man’s work of what sort it is.’[[70]](#endnote-70) But we are told that God does not save us by our works. ‘[God] hath saved us, and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began.’[[71]](#endnote-71) The logic is fascinating. God judges us by our works; but does not save us by our works: he saves us for having faith: and we have faith because we acknowledge that Jesus was doing God’s work; and so, having faith we follow Jesus, and imitate Paul, and work the works of God. It is a beguiling logic: not strictly consistent, but this is because consistency is a limit which has to be breached.

Everything else is detail. We hear that Jesus is ‘weary with his journey’, literally belaboured by it.[[72]](#endnote-72) We hear that the lilies of the field ‘toil not, neither do they spin’, literally, they do not labour.[[73]](#endnote-73) We hear that Peter labours all night to catch fish and takes nothing.[[74]](#endnote-74) We hear that the woman with ointment ‘works a good work’ on Jesus.[[75]](#endnote-75) We hear John the Divine in his Revelation declare that he knows the works and the labour of the church at Ephesus.[[76]](#endnote-76) Human work, like all human activity, may be good or bad.[[77]](#endnote-77) It can only be justified with reference to truth. This is the case for work, *ergon*, and labour, *kopos*. It is also true for *ponos*, the word for work so arduous that we are entirely passive in relation to it, and suffer from it. In the New Testament this word is usually not used for work but for pain. But it is possible to read it as meaning ‘work’ in the following famous sentence: ‘And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain [*ponos*]: for the former things are passed away.’[[78]](#endnote-78)

In sum, the originality of the New Testament is to suggest that work is made relative by faith. And yet things are not simple. Faith is faith in Christ crucified. But the crucifixion was the rendering of the *logos* into an *ergon*: not only did Jesus work the works of God in his miracles and teaching, but he worked the work of God by dying on the cross. The entirely passive experience of suffering undergone by Jesus on the cross, in Greek is called *pascho*, in Latin *passio*, in English ‘passion’. The suffering on the cross is never called an *ergon*: exactly because it is not done but suffered. But it was arguably Christ’s greatest work, where he worked the work of God in the most absolute sense of the word.

1. Arthur M. Hocart, *Kingship* (London: Watts and Co., 1941), p. 24. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Lines 11-26 in the Loeb edition Hesiod, *Theogony: Works and Days* [etc] ed. Glenn W. Most (Camb. Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2018), pp. 87-89. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. In this chapter I have depended on the following (especially the first two): 1. A Greek New Testament. I have used my grandfather’s copy of *The Kingdom Interlinear Translation of the Greek Scriptures* (New York: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York, 1969), based on Hort and Westcott’s Revised Version of 1881. 2. Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider eds., *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* 3 vols. (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1990). 3. H.F.D. Sparks, *A Synopsis of the Gospels* in 2 vols. Part I: *The Synoptic Gospels with the Johannine Parallels*, Part II: *The Gospel According to St John with the Synoptic Parallels* 2nd ed. (London: A. and C. Black, 1970), also based on the Revised Version. 4. Alan Richardson, *A Theological Word Book of the Bible* (London: SCM Press, 1950). 5. William Barclay, *New Testament Words* (London: SCM Press, 1964). For Biblical passages in English I use the King James Version; though, as well is known, the Revised Version is occasionally more accurate, and I also refer to this when necessary. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Acts 1.1. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Balz and Schneider eds., *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. I, p. 453 observes that *energeia* is almost always used with *kata*, implying, in addition to other clarifications, that something is effective because it comes from above. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Barclay comments: ‘all work is “liturgy” laid on men by God’. *New Testament Words*, p. 177. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Rom. 15.16: the King James Version renders *leitourgos* ‘minister’. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. G.R. Selby, *Jesus, Aramaic and Greek* (Doncaster: Brynmill, 1989); Stanley E. Porter, ‘The Use of Greek in First-Century Palestine: A Diachronic and Synchronic Examination’, *Journal of Greco-Roman Christianity and Judaism* 12 (2016), pp. 203-28. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Adam Milman Perry, *Logos and Ergon in Thucydides* (1957) (New York: Arno Press, 1981). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Gen. 2.2. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. John 1.1, 1.14. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. 2 Cor. 5.17. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. The gospel of John speaks of the *signs* that Jesus does (2.11, 23, 3.2, 4.54, 6.14, 6.30. 7.31, 11.47 etc) but also *works* that he does (7.3, 7.21, 14.12, 15.24 etc).He does the Father’s works in 5.36, 10.25, 10.37, 10.38. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Cf. Luke 13.14. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. John 5.17-20. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. John 5.21. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. John 9.4. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. John 6.28-29. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. John 6.30. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. John 1.43, 21.19. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. John 14.6. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. John 14.16, 14.26. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. John 13.34. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. John, 10.25, 10.30. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. John 10.32-33. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. John 10.37-38. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. John 14.10-12. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. John 17.4. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Michael Oakeshott, *What is History? and Other Essays* ed. Luke O’Sullivan (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2004), p. 48. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. 1 Cor. 1.11. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Gal. 5.19-21. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Gal. 5.22. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Rom. 2.9-10. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Rom. 3.9. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Rom. 3.10. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Rom. 3.20. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Rom. 3.23. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Gal. 3.22. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Rom. 13.10. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Rom. 3.24-5. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Rom. 3.27. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Rom. 2.17 & 3.27. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Rom. 3.28. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Rom. 4.2 & 5.1. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Balz and Schneider eds., *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. 3, p. 304. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. 1 Cor. 3.9. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. 1 Cor. 16.10. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. 1 Cor. 15.58, 1 Cor. 3.8, 2 Cor. 10.15, 1 Thess. 3.5. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. 1 Thess. 2.9, 2 Thess. 3.8. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. Rom. 16.6. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. 1 Cor. 4.12, 1 Cor. 15.10, Gal. 4.11. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. Gal. 5.6. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. 1 Cor. 13.13. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. 2 Cor. 10.11. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. 1 Joh. 3.18. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. Jas. 2.17. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. Jas. 2.26. [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. Matt. 23.28. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. Matt. 5.17. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. K.W. Clark, ‘The Meaning of *energeo* and *katargeo* in the New Testament’, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 54 (1935), pp. 93-101. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. 1 Cor. 15.24. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. Georgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans* trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 96 n. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. Rom. 7.5-6 [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
64. Agamben, *The Time That Remains*, p. 99. [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
65. Heb. 3.18-19. [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
66. Heb. 4.3 quoting Ps. 95.11. [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
67. Heb. 4.10-11. [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
68. Matt. 11.28. [↑](#endnote-ref-68)
69. 1 Pet. 1.17. [↑](#endnote-ref-69)
70. 1 Cor. 3.13. [↑](#endnote-ref-70)
71. 2 Tim. 1.9. [↑](#endnote-ref-71)
72. John 4.6. [↑](#endnote-ref-72)
73. Matt. 6.28. [↑](#endnote-ref-73)
74. Luke 5.5. [↑](#endnote-ref-74)
75. Matt 26.10. [↑](#endnote-ref-75)
76. Rev. 2.2. [↑](#endnote-ref-76)
77. Balz and Schneider eds., *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. 2, p. 50. [↑](#endnote-ref-77)
78. Rev. 21.4. [↑](#endnote-ref-78)