

God's Investment and Ours

Towards a Theology of Investment - Part One

Faith in Business has chosen 'investment' as its theme for 2022. This will include but go beyond financial investment. Consideration will also be given to other forms of capital, such as institutional, relational, moral and spiritual capital. In this first instalment of a four-part series of articles, Peter Heslam introduces the theme. He notes ways in which the Bible depicts God as an investor. And he highlights the apparent recklessness of some of the key biblical models of investment.

The Bible uses rich figurative language, and a variety of metaphors and analogies, in its depictions of God. Many of these are well-known, such as king, shepherd and judge. But one that is almost unknown is God as investor.

Yet it occurs right at the start of the Hebrew Bible. There we find God investing a formless, dark and empty earth with light and a profusion of plant and animal wildlife. God then invests this creation with human beings. And in them – them alone – God invests his image (Genesis 1).

Later in the Hebrew Bible we find God advising Jeremiah on a property investment – the prophet is to buy a field (Jeremiah 32). But God clearly shuns the 'location, location, location' precept of today's real estate experts. For the field in question is situated in territory occupied by the invading Babylonian army! Whatever happened to due diligence and *caveat emptor* (buyer beware)?

When we turn to the New Testament, we find that the use of wealth is a major theme in the teaching of Jesus. Yet here too, conventional wisdom is turned on its head. He does not, for instance, advise the rich young ruler to invest his wealth wisely and responsibly to optimise social impact. Instead, Jesus tells him to sell all he has and give to the poor (Lk 18.18–25), an action

that would have added the man to the number of poor people needing help. And the parabolic rich man who builds bigger warehouses to invest for the future is not called prudent but a fool (Lk 12.13–21).

Similarly perplexing is the parable that addresses the issue of investment most directly – the parable of the talents (Mt 25.14–30). The reader is left to work out its meaning. What is it about the three servants in that story that makes them so different in the investments and returns they make, and in the rewards and punishments they receive? Could it really be saying that all God cares about is the return on God's investment?

We also find Jesus investing a good deal of his time and energy – during his prime years – in a pretty flaky and shaky collection of prospects. It amounts to a motley crew of largely unschooled, hapless, and unreliable followers, all drawn from a relatively deprived region of the Roman Empire, and who end up abandoning him. When the crunch comes, they liquidate whatever investment they had in Jesus' ministry, one of them receiving a shoddy dividend of 30 pieces of silver (Mt 26.15).

The Apostle Paul shares in the apparent recklessness of Jesus' investment strategy. He pours his life into small and fragile communities of persecuted

Christians dispersed around the eastern fringes of the occupied territories of the Roman Empire. In doing so, he admits to acting 'like a madman', for it cost him heavy toil, imprisonments and near-death floggings (2 Cor 11.23).

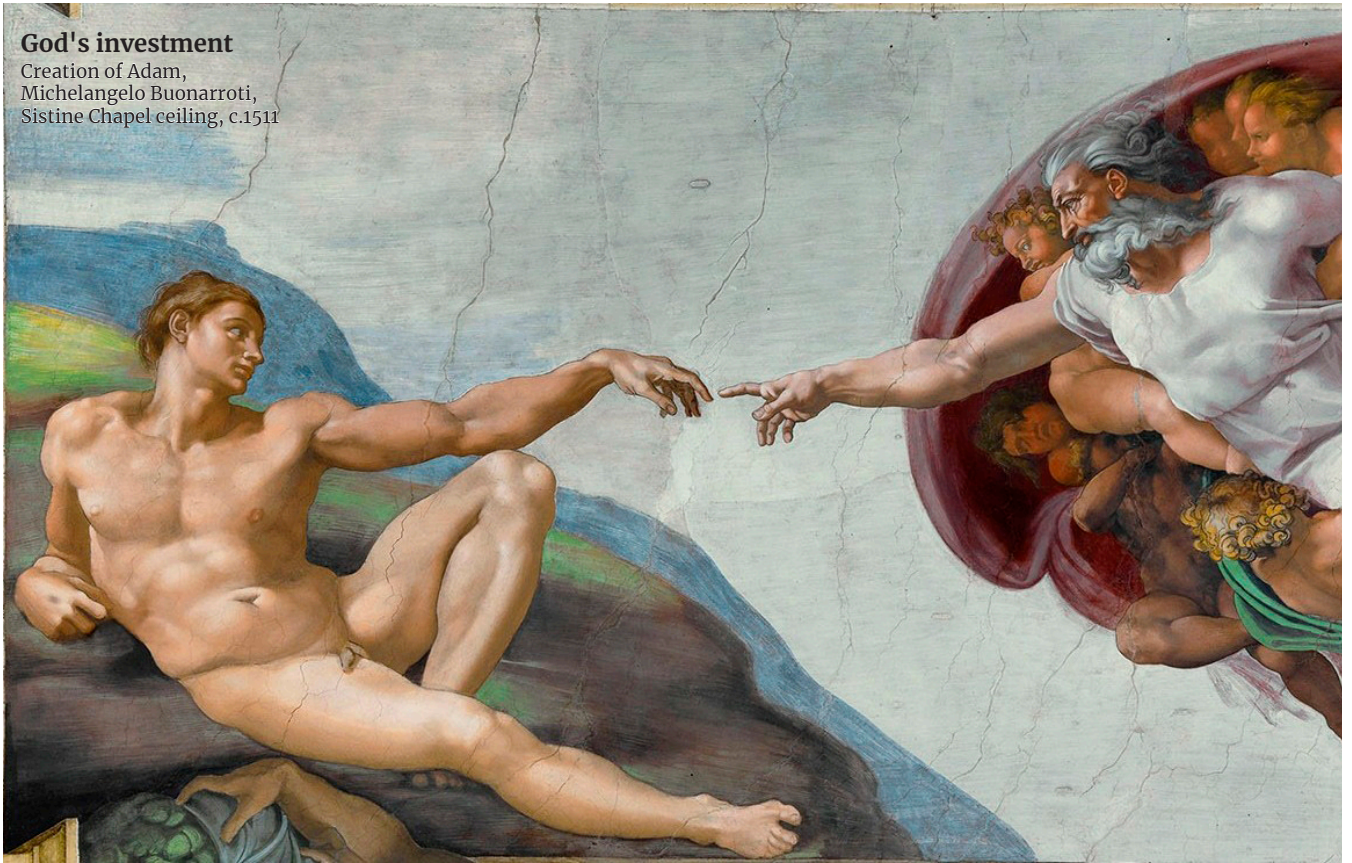
In fact, anyone currently considering whether or not to invest their lives in the service of Christ may first want to read the preamble to Paul's investment proposal:

Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked. And, besides other things, I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches (2 Cor 11.24–28).

Neither Jesus nor Paul made such costly investments, of course, without hope of a return. In the case of Jesus, it was 'for the sake of the joy that was set before him' that he 'endured the cross, disregarding its shame' (Heb 12.2).

God's investment

Creation of Adam,
Michelangelo Buonarroti,
Sistine Chapel ceiling, c.1511



Following his conversion, Paul shunned the return on investment (ROI) he had been making from his training to become a learned Pharisee. The ROI he now looked for was 'to know Christ and the power of his resurrection' (Philippians 3.8-10). And he considered the church communities in which he invested to be adequate ROI in themselves; he refers to them as his 'joy and crown' (Phil 4.1; 1 Thess 2.19).

Some of the biblical material will be revisited later in this series, in order to explore its ramifications for our investment in our work and in the people around us. Faith in Business, the co-publisher of FiBQ, is exploring this question in 2022. It will consider God's investment in the world and what implications that has for our investment strategy.

This exploration began with the Faith in Business Monthly online seminar on


An earlier version of this article was published in the Journal for Faith & Investing (faithandinvesting.com).

6th January. In that seminar, a panel of experts approached the theme of investment from different angles. In doing so, they provided rare insight on how scriptural principle relates to everyday practice. As part of Faith in Business' attempt to bring the quarterly journal and the monthly webinar closer together, subscribers can expect to read within these pages some of the theory and practice that is shared and discussed in these webinars.

I opened that seminar by noting the point I make at the start of this article about the picture of God as investor that is presented in the creation narratives. To elaborate here a little, this picture is reflected in God's 'investiture' of Adam and Eve as those appointed to name the animals and to rule (or 'have dominion') over God's creation (Gen 1.28). God thereby elevates them to the role of prophet, priest and king – three

offices symbolized in ancient Israel by the wearing of a mantel, or vestment.

Investiture, vestment, investment – all these words derive from the Latin vestire, meaning to clothe. Solomon, Jesus tells us, was vested (clothed) with splendid garments, yet God vests ordinary wild flowers with even greater splendour. How much more splendid, Jesus continues, is the way God vests ordinary human beings (Mt 6.28-30).

Made in God's image, Adam and Eve and their descendants are vested by God with dignity and authority. In other words, we need to regard ourselves, and all those around us, as God's investment. How then should we live and work? Join us in 2022 as we explore this together. Help us develop a theology of investment that has practical implications for all of life, business included! 



Dr Peter S Heslam is Director of Faith in Business and a Fellow of the Kirby Laing Centre for Public Theology, Cambridge (peter.heslam@cantab.net)