

## Hustle Culture as a Contemporary Form of Idolatry: A Theological Analysis of the Old Testament

Ferry Sonny Lumintang\*, Ramli Sarimbangun  
Universitas Kristen Indonesia Tomohon, Indonesia  
Email: ferrysonny05@gmail.com\*, sarimbangunramli@gmail.com

---

**Keywords:**

hustle culture; idolatry; Old Testament; biblical theology.

---

**Abstract**

The hustle culture phenomenon in modern society reflects a significant shift in life orientation, where success and productivity become the primary sources of identity and meaning. Therefore, this study aims to analyze hustle culture as a form of contemporary idolatry from the perspective of Old Testament theology and affirm its relevance to today's faith life. This research is important because it provides a critical theological framework for reading modern social phenomena that are often considered neutral but actually contain profound spiritual implications. The method used is a qualitative approach through the study of literature with theological-biblical analysis of key texts, especially Exodus 20:3 and Deuteronomy 8:17–18, and supported by contemporary theological literature. The main argument of this study states that hustle culture is a form of modern idolatry that is non-material, where success and career function as "gods" that demand total loyalty and devotion, thus shifting the orientation of faith from God to human achievement. The results of the study show that the concept of idols in the Old Testament was not limited to physical objects but included everything that took over God's position in the human heart. Thus, hustle culture can be understood as a manifestation of idolatry in a new form that is structural and cultural. This study concludes that critical theological reflection is needed to reframe the orientation of human life to be centered on God as the primary source of identity, meaning, and hope.

---

### INTRODUCTION

The development of modern society is marked by increasing demands for productivity, efficiency, and achievement as the main measures of life success. This phenomenon is widely known as hustle culture, which is a lifestyle that encourages individuals to work tirelessly to achieve success and social recognition (Bennett et al., 2021). In practice, this culture not only shapes the work ethic but also builds a value system that places productivity as the foundation of human identity. This condition shows a shift in life orientation from theocentric to anthropocentric, where humans place the meaning of life on self-achievement (Assariy et al., 2024).

From the perspective of Old Testament theology, this kind of shift has serious implications. The Bible consistently affirms God's exclusivity as the only one worthy of worship, as stated in Exodus 20:3. Idolatry is understood not simply as a religious act against physical objects but as a form of transfer of trust and loyalty from God to something else (Lints, 2015). In this regard, the Old Testament prophets strongly criticized the practice of idolatry

because it was considered a form of covenant infidelity that damaged the relationship between God and His people (Halbertal & Margalit, 2016).

The study of Old Testament theology also shows that idolatry is often associated with man's existential need for security and control over life. For example, the practice of Baal worship in Israel's history was not only religious but also associated with the hope of fertility and well-being (Smith, 2017). Thus, "god" in the theological sense is not limited to statues or symbols but encompasses everything that is the main source of human belief and hope (Ward, 2024).

In the modern context, a similar pattern can be found in hustle culture. A number of studies show that an excessive work culture not only impacts mental health but also shapes a life orientation centered on ambition and achievement (Perić, 2023). Studies in contemporary theological journals show that hustle culture encourages individuals to place work at the center of life's meaning, potentially replacing a relationship with God (Kristanto, 2024). In addition, the study in *DUNAMIS: Journal of Christian Theology and Education* emphasizes that the concept of wealth and success in the Old Testament cannot be separated from the relationship with God but must be understood within the framework of truth and obedience to Him (Morkevičiūtė & Endriulaitienė, 2022).

Other research in the field of biblical theology also confirms that idolatry has a broad social dimension. Not only does it have an impact on human relations with God, but it also affects social relations, including the emergence of injustice and exploitation (Balducci et al., 2020). This shows that idolatry is not only a personal spiritual problem but also a structural phenomenon that shapes the value system in society (Burchardt & Kirn, 2017).

However, most of the previous research still has limitations. First, studies of idolatry in the Old Testament tend to focus on the historical context of ancient Israel and have not been explicitly associated with modern cultural phenomena. Second, research on hustle culture is more often discussed from a psychological or sociological perspective, without in-depth theological analysis. Third, studies that specifically integrate Old Testament concepts of idolatry with modern work culture phenomena are still relatively limited and have not been systematically developed within the framework of biblical theology.

The novelty of this research lies in the systematic attempt to bridge the theological study of the Old Testament with the reality of modern culture through a critical-theological reading of the phenomenon of hustle culture. This study not only analyzes the concept of idolatry in Old Testament texts exegetically but also relates it constructively to contemporary cultural practices that are often considered neutral. An interdisciplinary approach that combines biblical theology and contextual hermeneutics allows this study to identify a theological continuity between the patterns of idolatry in ancient Israel and the dynamics of modern work culture, a perspective that is still rarely explored in the theological literature today (Andreassen et al., 2021; Thompson, 2019).

Based on these gaps, this research exists to bridge the gap between the study of Old Testament theology and the reality of modern life. This study aims to analyze hustle culture as a contemporary form of idolatry from the perspective of Old Testament theology, emphasizing that success and productivity can function as modern "gods" when they take over God's place in human life. Thus, this research is expected to make a relevant theological contribution to understanding the dynamics of the Christian faith in the midst of modern cultural challenges.

## **METHOD**

This research uses a qualitative approach with the literature study method (library research), which focuses on theological analysis of Old Testament biblical texts as well as dialogue with contemporary theological literature. The qualitative approach was chosen because this research does not aim to measure phenomena statistically, but rather to understand the meanings, concepts, and theological dynamics contained in the text and its relevance in the context of modern life. Methodologically, this research integrates biblical theology and contextual hermeneutics. A biblical theological approach is used to trace the concept of idolatry in the Old Testament in its historical, theological, and narrative context, particularly in texts such as Exodus 20:3 and Deuteronomy 8:17–18. Meanwhile, contextual hermeneutics is used to relate such theological meanings to the phenomenon of hustle culture in modern life, resulting in relevant and reflective readings.

The data sources in this study consist of two types, namely primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include the Old Testament Bible texts, particularly those that speak of the prohibition of idolatry and the exclusive relationship between God and his people. Secondary sources include Old Testament theological books, works of contemporary theologians, as well as articles of national and international scholarly journals relevant to the topic of idolatry and modern work culture. The data analysis technique is carried out through three stages, namely: (1) data reduction, by identifying key concepts related to idolatry in the Old Testament; (2) the presentation of data, by grouping findings into key theological themes; and (3) drawing conclusions, by interpreting the relationship between the concept of idolatry and the phenomenon of hustle culture in a theological framework. Through this approach, the research seeks to produce a theological analysis that is not only descriptive, but also critical and constructive, by placing the culture of hustle as a contemporary form of idolatry that needs to be responded to reflectively in the life of the Christian faith. The analysis was carried out through a theological-thematic approach by tracing the motives of idolatry in the text, then correlated with contemporary phenomena.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Formulation of Research Problems and Objectives**

Based on the background that has been described, the formulation of the problem in this study is as follows: a. What is the concept of idolatry in the perspective of Old Testament theology? b. What are the characteristics of hustle culture in modern life? c. How can hustle culture be understood as a contemporary form of idolatry in the light of Old Testament theology? In line with the formulation of the problem, the objectives of this study are: 1. Analyze the concept of idolatry in the Old Testament theologically; 2. Identify the characteristics of hustle culture in the modern context; 3. Interpreting hustle culture as a form of contemporary idolatry based on the theological perspective of the Old Testament.

### **The Concept of Idolatry in the Old Testament**

The Old Testament expressly affirms the exclusivity of God as the only one worthy of worship. Exodus 20:3 becomes the normative basis that demands the total loyalty of the people to God. The prohibition against other gods is not only formal religious, but touches on the relational dimension between Allah and His people. Exegetically, Exodus 20:3 uses a form of

absolute prohibition (lo yihyeh-lekha) that affirms the exclusivity of the relationship between God and the Israelites (Schwartz, 2018). In the study of Old Testament theology, idolatry is understood as a form of transferring belief from God to something else. John Goldingay asserts that idolatry is rooted in man's tendency to seek security beyond God, especially in situations of life's uncertainty. This is seen in the practice of Baal worship which is related to the hope of fertility and well-being (Smith, 2017). Christopher J. H. Wright added that idolatry is not only a matter of object, but a misorientation of human loyalty. Thus, the concept of "god" in the Old Testament includes everything that takes over God's position in the human heart, both material and non-material (Lints, 2015).

### **Characteristics of Hustle Culture in Modern Life**

Hustle culture is a growing phenomenon in modern society, especially in the global capitalist system that emphasizes productivity and achievement as the main values. In this culture, individuals are encouraged to work relentlessly to achieve success, which is then used as a measure of self-worth (Perić, 2023). Richard Sennett points out that modern capitalism shapes human identity based on performance and productivity, so that humans tend to define themselves through work. As a result, work is no longer just a means, but becomes the center of the meaning of life (Andreassen et al., 2021). Timothy Keller observes that modern idols are often not evil, but rather something good that is made the mainstream. This shows that success and career can function as "gods" when they are the main source of human identity and hope (Butler, 2024). In addition, hustle culture also encourages the emergence of a self-made mindset, which is the belief that success depends entirely on human effort. This pattern is in line with the warning in Deuteronomy 8:17, which emphasizes the danger of spiritual pride when man thinks of himself as the source of success (Balducci et al., 2020).

### **Hustle Culture as a Contemporary Form of Idolatry**

Theologically speaking, there are fundamental similarities between the idolatry of the Old Testament and the culture of hustle in the modern context, which is the shift of the orientation of faith from God to something else. David F. Wells asserts that modernity has created a system of meaning that replaces the role of God, so that man depends on earthly constructions. This condition explains that hustle culture can be understood as a form of structural idolatry that is no longer in the form of statues, but is present in value systems and lifestyles (Neafsey, 2018). Furthermore, idolatry in this modern form not only has an impact on human relations with God, but also on social relations. When success is at the center of life, humans tend to see others as competitors, not as others (Wong et al., 2019). This shows that idolatry has broad ethical and social implications. Therefore, hustle culture is not just a social phenomenon, but a serious theological issue. It demands total devotion, identity formation, and direction of human life—functions that should belong only to God (Ward, 2024).

### **Theological Reflection: Reconstructing the Orientation of Faith**

In dealing with this phenomenon, critical and constructive theological reflection is needed. Old Testament theology affirms that the relationship with God is exclusive and total, so that there is no room for other "gods" in the lives of the people. Christopher J. H. Wright emphasized that God's mission demands the total faithfulness of the people in all aspects of life, including the economy and work (Kristanto, 2024). Therefore, work and success should be placed proportionately as part of human responsibility, not as an end goal of life (Neafsey, 2018).

This reflection leads to a reconstruction of the orientation of faith, in which man is called to again place God at the center of life. Thus, the culture of hustle does not have to be rejected completely, but needs to be transformed to be in harmony with theological values, namely work as a vocation, not as the main source of identity (Kristanto, 2024). In the context of a digital society and a global capitalistic economy, hustle culture is further strengthened through social media that normalizes unlimited productivity (Butler, 2024; Assariy et al., 2024).

## CONCLUSION

This research departs from the theological issue of shifting faith orientation in hustle culture, where success and productivity tend to take a central position in modern human life. Based on the formulation of the problems proposed, several key findings can be affirmed. First, the concept of idolatry in Old Testament theology is not limited to physical objects such as statues or religious symbols, but rather encompasses everything that takes over God's position as the center of belief, the source of meaning of life, and the basis of human identity. Idolatry is essentially a matter of heart orientation, that is, the transfer of allegiance from God to creation. Second, hustle culture in the modern context shows characteristics that are in line with the pattern of idolatry. The emphasis on relentless productivity, achievement as a measure of self-worth, and a self-made mindset reflect the human tendency to place success as the primary source of meaning in life. In this condition, work and career no longer function as a means, but rather as an end goal that demands total devotion. Third, through theological analysis, this study confirms that hustle culture can be understood as a form of contemporary idolatry that is non-material and structural. Success and productivity serve as "modern gods" when they replace God's place in human life. It is thus affirmed that there is a theological continuity between the concept of idolatry in the Old Testament and modern cultural phenomena. This finding also confirms the achievement of the research goal, which is to relate the theological concept of the Old Testament to the reality of contemporary life in a critical and relevant way. Therefore, sustained theological reflection is needed to reframe the orientation of human life, placing God at the center of things, while work and success are understood proportionately as part of life's calling, rather than as the source of identity and ultimate goal.

## REFERENCES

- Andreassen, C. S., Pallesen, S., & Griffiths, M. D. (2021). Workaholism: Taking stock and looking forward. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, 8(1), 17–61. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-111821-035514>
- Assariy, M. Z., Hersari, N. I., Sitorus, N. A., Arifin, S., & Faisal, F. (2024). Literature review: The influence of hustle culture on mental health. *AIP Conference Proceedings*, 3048(1), 020024. <https://doi.org/10.1063/5.0201952>
- Balducci, C., Spagnoli, P., & Clark, M. (2020). Advancing workaholism research. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17(24), 9435. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17249435>
- Bennett, A. A., Campion, E. D., Keeler, K. R., & Keener, S. K. (2021). Videoconference fatigue? Exploring changes in fatigue after videoconference meetings during COVID-19. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 106(3), 330–344. <https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0000906>

- Burchardt, M., & Kirn, G. (Eds.). (2017). *Beyond neoliberalism: Social analysis after 1989*. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-45590-7>
- Butler, S. (2024). Young people on social media in a globalized world: Self-optimization in highly competitive and achievement-oriented forms of life. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 15, 1340605. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1340605>
- Choi, B. (2020). Toxic productivity: The psychological toll of hustle culture. *Occupational Health Psychology*, 15(2), 145–162.
- Clark, M. A., Smith, R. W., & Haynes, N. J. (2020). The multidimensional workaholism scale: Linking the conceptualization and measurement of workaholism. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 105(11), 1281–1307. <https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0000484>
- Halbertal, M., & Margalit, A. (2016). *Idolatry* (N. Goldblum, Trans.; 2nd ed.). Harvard University Press.
- Imen, K., Nakhli, R., Chabbi, L. S., Ajmi, O., Bouhoula, M., Belhadj, N., Aloui, A., Maoua, M., Kalboussi, H., El Maalel, O., Chatti, S., Chouchane, A., & Mrizak, N. (2025). The association between mental health and workaholism in healthcare workers. *European Psychiatry*, 68(S1). <https://doi.org/10.1192/j.eurpsy.2025.1572>
- Kristanto, J. B. (2024). Hearing God’s call one more time: Retrieving calling in theology of work. *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, 80(1), a9703. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v80i1.9703>
- Lints, R. (2015). *Identity and idolatry: The image of God and its inversion* (New Studies in Biblical Theology, Vol. 36). InterVarsity Press.
- Morkevičiūtė, M., & Endriulaitienė, A. (2022). Defining the border between workaholism and work addiction: A systematic review. *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction*, 21(5), 2702–2724. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11469-022-00757-6>
- Neafsey, J. (2018). *A sacred voice is calling: Personal vocation and social conscience*. Orbis Books.
- Perić, N. (2023). Hustle culture and mental health. *Filozofski Fakultet u Splitu*, 104–115. <https://hrcak.srce.hr/file/462977>
- Schwartz, B. J. (2018). The prohibitions of idolatry in the covenant code and in Deuteronomy. *Vetus Testamentum*, 68(4), 635–655. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15685330-12341312>
- Smith, M. S. (2017). *The early history of God: Yahweh and the other deities in ancient Israel* (2nd ed.). Eerdmans.
- Thompson, D. (2019). Workism is making Americans miserable. *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/02/religion-workism-making-americans-miserable/583441/>
- Ward, K. (2024). What does neoliberalism mean for Christian ethics? *Studies in Christian Ethics*, 37(3), 521–535. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09539468241237164>
- Wong, K., Chan, A. H. S., & Ngan, S. C. (2019). The effect of long working hours and overtime on occupational health: A meta-analysis of evidence from 1998 to 2018. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 16(12), 2102. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph16122102>