

# The labourers in the vineyard, theory of value and agriculture

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The purpose of this article was to investigate the potential that the labour and subjective theory of value in the agricultural context may have for the interpretation of Matthew 20:1–16. This investigation highlighted the divergence in wages between workers, the exuberant remuneration strategy of the landowner, his generosity, the indignation of the labourers hired first and the landowner's reluctance to reimburse them. I argued that the classic labour theory of value provides an explanation of why the indignant labourers were angry and felt unjustly treated. However, it fails to account for the divergence in remuneration more appropriately addressed by subjective theory of value that focuses on the use value of goods and marginal utility. Finally, the agrarian theory provides perspective on the unwillingness of the landowner to reimburse the indignant labourers and the mystery of meaningful labour in agriculture that serves as a metaphor for the kingdom of heaven.

**Contribution:** In the article, labour and subjective theory of value were introduced from an agrarian perspective to enlighten the hermeneutics of the parable.

**Keywords:** Matthew 20:1–16; labour theory of value; subjective theory of value; agriculture; hermeneutics; Adam Smith; David Ricardo; Karl Marx.

## Introduction

The parable<sup>1</sup> of the labourers in the vineyard in Matthew 20:1–16<sup>2</sup> contains important themes such as labour, wages, fairness, generosity and agriculture that resonate with the labour and subjective theory of value and agrarian theory. This is seen in the explicit agricultural context of the parable that focuses on the employment of labourers by a landowner to work in his vineyard. Further, the employment practices of the time, preceded by negotiation in relation to the workday (sunrise to sunset), closely mirrors the classical economic labour theory of value of Smith<sup>3</sup> ([1776] 2007), David Ricardo ([1817] 1973) and Karl Marx ([1859] 1970). The theory of value is then disrupted in the parable by the perceived unfair landowner, who pays labourers who worked much fewer hours the same as people employed at the start of the customary workday. This discrepancy in wages has been scrutinised from divergent perspectives by scholars and other readers of the text (Takagi 2020).

The divergence of perspectives on the parable has prompted Takagi (2020:214) to propose an economic reading of the text. He proposes a more nuanced understanding of distributive justice that is not reduced to communitarianism, and a system in which all labourers should receive the same wage without discrimination of effort or expertise. Conversely, the focus of the parable according to him is 'that those with material wealth must be actively engaged in seeking out opportunities to help the poor without delegating the task to someone else' (Takagi 2020:214). Further, the work of Van Eck and Kloppenborg (2015) reflects on the agricultural theme. They use archaeological evidence and documented papyri from early Roman Egypt that contain examples of agricultural practice and management of vineyards to highlight the significance of agricultural practice to understand the parable and the generosity of the landowner. The purpose and novelty of this article is that it introduces labour and subjective theory of value from an agrarian context to enlighten the hermeneutics of the parable. The use of economic theory is an attempt to access meaning dimensions of the text that are not accessible from more traditional approaches and can therefore be viewed as experimental and to stimulate dialogue on viable alternative interpretations of the text.

1.The *New International Version* (2011) of the Bible is used for the English translation of the text.

2.Van Eck and Kloppenborg (2015) note that many scholars argue that v.16 was a later addition to the gospel.

3.*An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (2007) is referenced by uppercase Roman numerals for the books and lowercase Roman numerals for the chapters. The parts and paragraphs are in regular numbers.

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In this article, firstly, the modes of interpretation of Matthew 20:1–16 will be reviewed critically to position the specific contribution of this article and its emphasis on labour and subjective theory of value in the agricultural context. Secondly, from this discussion will follow a critical exploration of classical theory of value from Smith and Ricardo to Marx. Thirdly, the subjective theory of value and agrarian theory will be presented as an alternative to address the shortcomings of the classic labour theory of value; the writer can then provide novel insights into the understanding of the parable, such as the role of marginal utility, the complexity of value in agriculture, sociality and the relation of people to the land.

### History of interpretation of Matthew 20:1–16

Five distinct historical modes of interpretation of Matthew 20:1–16 can be distinguished. The first mode is considered allegorical and is influenced by patristic writings (early 1st century to 9th century AD writings of the Church Fathers) which sought to unravel the hidden meaning of the parable. The hidden meaning usually contains a moral or principle that applies to various aspects of life in the interpretation of the parable (Bloomfield 1972:307). Several readers using this mode of interpretation emphasise that the workers represent gentiles, while the land refers to Israel, who are cultivated by God. These symbolic references to gentiles and Israel underscore the impossibility of salvation through works and the abundant grace of God (Kloppenborg 2006; Van Eck & Kloppenborg 2015:1). An example of this type of interpretation is found in St Augustine's (354–430) sermon in which the task of cultivating the land is seen as a symbolic reference to the cultivation of souls, and the times the landowner went to hire labourers are references to the prominent figures in the stages of the history of Israel (e.g. the covenant and Abrahamic period, Exodus, Moses, prophets and so forth), who will all receive their reward with the church of the *eschaton* (e.g. the eleventh hour) (Tevel 1992). This type of interpretation does elevate the mundane events described in the parable to greater significance in terms of *heilsgeschichte* and the biblical traditions. The problem is that it does not answer the question of why the prominent figures of the biblical tradition would then complain about why they received the same remuneration for their toils as the latecomers. It seems strange that the beacons of faith in the Bible would display this type of indignation.

The second mode of interpretation is closely associated with scholasticism and highlights the role of the patristic tradition and philosophy, specifically Aristotle (Stone 2002). These interpretations have an eschatological focus and the articulation of an ideal value or principle for spiritual life and salvation. Thomas Aquinas (late 13th century) noted that the parable provides insight into the nature of God's grace (Caponi 2018:90). Aquinas (2011) notes that the charity shown by the landowner to the labourers hired later does not figuratively represent a tension between the unconditional grace of God and equitable reward. They are about the visibility of God's works of salvation as a result of his justice

and mercy. In other words, the grace of God is presented as the purest form of unearned salvation and reflects the purity of God's love and majesty. The influence of philosophy adds a conceptual dimension to the generally dogmatic view of the patristic tradition. Therefore, the generous display of the landowner does go beyond the mundane events portrayed in the text by focusing on the philosophical essentialist aspect of divine grace that is elevated beyond dogma to a universal concept. Scholasticism goes beyond the patristic tradition by logically connecting the parable to a core theological principle that has application far above church tradition. However, it is problematic that the landowner does negotiate with the labourers hired first, offering a reward based on the work to be done in a day, thereby accentuating work and not grace. This variance seems to unravel the argument that grace was the only motive behind the parable.

Realist modes of interpretation replaced scholasticism by underscoring everyday life, the mundane and human aspects of the text, such as the authorship of the text, its historical context, the audience, their everyday problems, culture, economics and social dynamics (Mautner 2000). Jeremias (1972) argues that the parable is a public rebuke of Pharisees, whose criticism of Jesus is a display of their merciless and hateful demeanour. Modes of interpretation that explore these realist aspects also include investigations into the composition and historical evolution of the text found in source, form, redaction, historical and literary criticism, amongst others. These methods attempt to logically disentangle the text from patristic and scholastic traditions by focusing on the human aspect of the evolution of the text, the context, structure, genre and audience, amongst others.

The importance of the historical aspects of 1st century Palestine is supported by Herzog (1994), who notes that the parable depicts the injustice experienced by labourers from the peasant classes and the importance of God's justice. This does not mean that the theological importance of the parable is neglected. The opposite is true. The theological perspective is informed by investigating the historical rootedness of the text itself and therefore gives expression to a more scientifically informed understanding of the parable (Bultmann 1968). This is seen in the way historical investigation regarding labour practice, wages and agriculture accentuates the focus on the unique nature of the kingdom of God, morality and ethics, the church as a caring community and alternative practices for economics and welfare (Van Eck & Kloppenborg 2015). The historical embeddedness of these approaches does have limitations in terms of the sophistication and knowledge required to understand the text; these approaches focus less on the existential struggles of contemporary readers. Even so, these modes do attempt to bridge the gap between contemporary readers and the text.

During the second half of the 20th century, a shift in biblical scholarship under the influence of phenomenology (specifically hermeneutics) led to various forms of contextual

biblical scholarship that underscored the importance of socio-economic and political aspects prevalent in societies across the globe (Wells 2017). The rise of liberation, feminist, black, Hispanic, Dalit and other contextual theologies paved the way for interpretations of the Bible from the lifeworlds of ordinary contemporary readers of the text and their struggles for recognition and emancipation (Pears 2009). The major contribution of these modes of understanding is that they underscore the role of contemporary readers in the interpretation of the text. From this perspective, Matthew 20:1–16 contains many signifiers that relate to labour issues, economic inequality, political economy, communitarianism and social justice, amongst others. However, the danger is that interpretation by contemporary readers can easily be usurped by subjectivism and interpretations that erode the signifying power of the text. This is why Hedrick (2004:43) warns readers of the Bible that knowledge of labour practices, culture, politics and agriculture of Palestine in the 1st century, as well as the benefits of literature, archaeology and history studies, must be incorporated for responsible interpretations of the parable. This scientific knowledge emphasises the more nuanced and subtle aspects of the text and steers the reader clear of the theological reductionism that was prevalent during the patristic and scholastic period.

Therefore, the major additional benefit of this mode of interpretation is that contemporary theories and models can be used to understand the text, such as sociology (Scott 1989), psychology, anthropology, cultural criticism (Klingbeil 2005) and economics theory (Takagi 2020; Vearncombe 2010). Scott (1989) uses a social-scientific approach and underscores the patron–client dynamics in the parable. Equal remuneration is viewed as resistance to the Roman patron–client system through the grace of God. Levine and Myrick (2013), following an economic analysis, highlight the generosity of the landowner. It is this benefit that will be explored further in the rest of the article by focusing on labour and subjective theory of value in the context of agriculture.

### Labour theory of value, agriculture and the vineyard labourers

Smith's classic labour theory of value accentuates that value is determined by the price of the labour required to produce a product. Smith (WN I.v.1) states the following concerning labour as a measure of value:

The value of any commodity, therefore, to the person who possesses it, and who means not to use or consume it himself, but to exchange it for other commodities, is equal to the quantity of labor which it enables him to purchase or command. Labor, therefore, is the real measure of the exchangeable value of all commodities. [Smith ([1776] 2007:18)(WN I.v.1)]

For Smith, labour is the singular measure of value, and the value of exchanged goods must be equal to the labour. In other words, the price we pay for goods and services is equal to the labour performed for the money and performed to produce the goods. Smith (WN I.v.2) notes:

The real price of everything, what everything really costs to the man [*sic*] who wants to acquire it, is the toil and trouble of acquiring it. What everything is worth to the man who has acquired it, and who wants to dispose of it or exchange it for something else, is the toil and trouble which it can save to himself, and which it can impose upon other people. What is bought with money or with goods is purchased by labor as much as what we acquire by the toil of our own body. That money or those goods indeed save us this toil. They contain the value of a certain quantity of labor which we exchange for what is supposed at the time to contain the value of an equal quantity. [Smith ([1776] 2007:18–19)(WN I.v.2)]

Foley (2000) notes that:

[... *P*]rimary function of *labor* theory of value was to locate the source of wealth in the productive activity of the population rather than in the God-given fertility of land or its hordes of treasure. (pp. 2–3)

This perspective of Smith was influenced by the *Enlightenment* belief in the potential of human ingenuity, creativity and the ability to rise above the challenges people face. In this regard, wealth or poverty is not the predetermined fate of people. Foley (2000) underscores that:

[T]he labor theory of value is a return to fundamental realities of human existence, a way of redirecting the attention of his audience from ways to take already produced wealth away from others through interest or rent, toward projects for creating wealth through the organization of productive labor. (p. 3)

From the context of agriculture, Smith's reduction of value to labour is potentially problematic from the perspective of agrarianism. Agrarian philosophy (to be discussed in more detail in the next section) denotes that agriculture is the root of sustainable economics because of the complex interrelationship of land, community, labour, nature and norms (Thompson 2008:528). This complex interconnected phenomenon is salient in the evolution of culture, tradition, politics, values and norms of people in a particular context (Thompson 2008:527). The complex nature of agrarianism challenges Smith's theory of value because other aspects like nature, community and so forth play a salient role in determining value.

Conversely, Smith did recognise that agriculture does have the element of rent that must also be added to the profit from labour (WN IV.ix.10). This excess can then be used to improve the land and increase its productive capacity (WN IV.ix.23). Smith (WN IV.ix.24) notes that the increase in resources produced by agriculture can also raise capital for manufacture:

According to this liberal and generous system, therefore, the most advantageous method in which a landed nation can raise up artificers, manufacturers, and merchants of its own is to grant the most perfect freedom of trade to the artificers, manufacturers, and merchants of all other nations. [Smith ([1776] 2007:521)(WN IV.ix.24)]

However, the problem remains that from a theoretical point of view, labour is presented as the sole determining factor to determine value. It does not consider, when calculating

value, that the excess rent generated by agricultural improvements and the role of nature, amongst others, increase the wealth and the capital of an economy.

Ricardo ([1817] 1973) fully endorses Smith's work but differs on the point of natural price simply seen as the sum of the natural levels of wages, profits and rents. Ricardo ([1817] 1973) argues that a much more encompassing analysis of the distribution of the value across the value chain is required. This implies that not only the value of labour for production but the value of labour for the provision of raw material, equipment and the capital required for these operations is required. This is referred to as 'embodied labor' (Foley 2000:3). The implication of Ricardo's theory is that the existence of capital must predate production. Capital is required to produce raw material, develop technology, build factories and purchase land. For Ricardo ([1817] 1973), embodied labour places a limit on the output of production and value claims related to output influenced by wages, rent and profit, which in turn means that the rise in one of the income categories comes at the expense of the other two. Therefore, if an investor requires more profit from a commercial project, the extra income is generated by either a decrease in rent for building and equipment or a decreased expense in wages. It is this aspect of the value theory of labour that interested Marx.

The major difference between Smith and Ricardo's labour theory of value and that of Marx is the fact that Marx's version is infused with historical materialism that accentuates the real-life existence and behaviour of people rather than belief in transcendent systems (e.g. religion, naturalism). This led Marx to discover that class difference was kept in place by mechanisms, controlled by the wealthy, to access and control surplus production (Marx [1859] 1970). The implication is that the class of '... landowners and capitalists, control the surplus production of capitalist society by appropriating rent and profit from the stream of value produced by labor' (Foley 2000:5). This means (following the logic of Ricardo) that workers are not compensated for their entire labour effort. The proportion of the unpaid labour of workers is what Marx refers to as *exploitation*. Marx ([1859] 1970) proposes a unified theory of value, labour and money. In other words, value is not only a matter of exchange-value but must include use-value that represents two different currency values. This is represented in the difference between market prices and natural prices of production, which is not always proportional to the embodied labour (Ricardo's distribution of value). Foley (2000:7) concludes that the labour theory of value was a 'theory of exploitation and money' and not a theory of relative prices. In other words, he uses it as an analytical tool to understand the dynamics of labour as a function of exploitation. Kloppenborg (2006:351) picks up this critical line of the argument in the context of the parable and views it as 'critical of wealth, inheritance and status ...' and that the illogical behaviour of the landowner is similar to the parable of the Rich Fool in Luke 12:16–20. From this perspective, the narrative is part of the parables of Jesus

in which the wealthy classes are unexpectedly in situations where their values and/or the values of their hearers are challenged (Kloppenborg 2006:352).

In the case of Matthew 20:1–16, the indignation of the workers who started at the beginning of the workday and received the same wage as those who started to work later fits in perfectly with Smith's labour theory of value. Their labour and its reward can be related to the value of the produce of the vineyard, following Smith's argument. Therefore, receiving the same amount for less work was a contradiction of the basic labour theory of value. This contradiction did not only upset the labourers, but it could also potentially undermine the financial sustainability of the vineyard, because owing to the logic of the labour theory of value, the price of the produce will become disproportionately elevated because of the disproportionately high labour costs. Similarly, from the perspective of the parable, the extraordinary nature of the owner's decision is what makes the parable unique.

The insights of Ricardo do provide a more realistic interpretation of the text by introducing the complex nature of use-value, which is not limited to labour as only variable to determine value. The implication is that profit and rent increases can negatively impact the wages that labourers receive, as Marx points out, although in the case of the parable, rent is not applicable because the text identifies the person who went to hire labourers as the owner of the vineyard. From this perspective, the parable and specifically the behaviour of the landowner are peculiar from an economic perspective. By increasing the wages of labourers, the implication is that the profit and rent will be directly affected because it decreases the resources to invest in the improvement of the vineyard for future production. Therefore, the sustainability of the vineyard's finances is undermined and can also be viewed as mismanagement, as Smith's theory also pointed out. This has direct implications for the job security of the permanent and hired labour. It has the added implication, considering Ricardo and later Marx, that the wage discrepancy could also be viewed as the exploitation of the workers who started at the beginning of the day, because it may indicate that their wage was unfair (although the text does state the opposite in v. 13).

The hiring of workers at different times of the day could specify that the landowner reconsidered the wage negotiated with the first workers and therefore entered a more just (δικαιον<sup>4</sup> – [put right, righteous, proper, fair]) remuneration agreement (v. 4). The word οικοδεσπότη in Ancient Greek, translated with 'landowner' in the text, has a much wider meaning than in contemporary English. It refers to the head of a household or family and not only to a landowner or property investor in the contemporary sense. Van Eck and Kloppenborg (2015) support this wider understanding of the οικοδεσπότη by indicating from Papyri documentary evidence that the head of a household would not be directly involved

<sup>4</sup>Strong's Concordance with Hebrew and Greek Lexicon (2009) was used throughout this article to reference Greek words.

in managing the affairs of a vineyard. This assignment would be delegated to other employees in charge of the vineyard. These employees would be responsible for wage negotiations and other matters relating to the vineyard. The reason for this is that the *οικοδεσπότης* is responsible for the governance of the entire estate, family matters and so forth.

This would explain the repeated return to the market to employ more workers, because the landowner was probably not experienced in the day-to-day running of a vineyard. This does clarify the equitable wages paid by the landowner, but it does not explain why the wages of the workers hired first could be viewed as fair (*ἀδίκῳ* – [not unjust towards, harmful, or causing injury]) based on negotiations (vv. 2, 13) by the landowner at the end of the parable. The reference to negotiation in vv. 2 and 13 is from the Greek *συμφωνήσας* that literally means [agree, harmonise, agree together]. The word implies that agreements between workers and landowners could involve complex social dynamics and power imbalances that could lead to a situation whereby a labourer accepts an unfair wage because of high unemployment. The value of the agreement could be compromised and not reflect the labour involved, or harmony, as suggested. Whereas the owner was generous as mentioned in v. 15, it is suggested from the perspective of the labour theory of value that his actions could impact the value of the produce.

This distortion does imply that the initial negotiation could have been unfair, whether because of shrewdness or inexperience, even though a denarius was a legally accepted wage and not generally viewed as unfair. Further, the text only intimates that the labourers hired at the ninth hour (v. 3) received fair or equitable compensation. The problem with this interpretation is that the text highlights (v. 15) that the landowner is generous and fair in his negotiation strategy, not shrewd or inexperienced. The landowner notes that he can express his *θέλω* [will, wish, desire, design] and that it is legally protected. The word *ἐξεστίν* is translated in English as [permitted, lawful, possible]. The landowner uses legal language to defend his generosity. It could also be a legal way to avert legal consequences for not increasing the compensation of these workers.

Therefore, the reference in v. 13 substantiates that the wages paid were fair and based on prior negotiations. Although the negotiations could be flawed based on the possible inexperience of the landowner, the agreement was legally binding. Or, if it was an act of shrewdness, it could be based on the difference between the perceived value of labour and not real value of labour. This would be unjust and imply that he deceived the workers or misused his power during the negotiations (e.g. landowner versus worker). The problem is that it is illogical that the landowner (through deception or inexperience) would purposefully disadvantage those labourers who worked a full day if he displays abundant generosity to the others. Further, it could also be that the landowner followed two different remuneration strategies, namely paying the early workers on merit and the ones hired later on the basis of charity.

The motive of the landowner's act of generosity cannot be explained from the perspective of the labour theory of value, because his generosity seems to be incompatible with responsible ownership, job security of employees, the possible exploitation of the workers hired earlier and the inexperience hypothesis, while his generosity is the salient aspect of the parable. The reason for this impossibility is that labour theory of value cannot explicate the complex nature of price difference or unequal value of exchange. Subjective theory of value attempts to address this limitation in the labour theory of value.

### Subjective theory of value, agriculture and the vineyard labourers

The subjective theory of value was a response from the Austrian School of Economics to address the limitations of the labour theory of value. Menger ([1871] 2007) and Eugen von Boehm-Bawerk, amongst other 19th-century economists, argued that value cannot be limited to the cost of labour to produce goods. Menger (2007) introduced the use and exchange value of goods and thereby challenged Aristotle's equal value model for exchange. Menger (2007) writes as follows:

I have devoted special attention to the investigation of the causal connections between economic phenomena involving products and the corresponding agents of production, not only for the purpose of establishing a price theory based upon reality and placing all price phenomena (including interest, wages, ground rent, etc.) together under one unified point of view, but also because of the important insights we thereby gain into many other economic processes heretofore completely misunderstood. (p. 49)

Value is related to the perception of the worth of goods for different people. In other words, the value of goods or labour is determined by the needs of the buyer (or employer in the case of labour). Menger (2007) distinguishes between useful things and goods:

Things that can be placed in a causal connection with the satisfaction of human needs we term useful things. If, however, we both recognize this causal connection, and have the power to direct the useful things to the satisfaction of our needs, we call them goods. (p. 52)

Therefore, Menger (2007) argues that for useful things to become goods, four basic conditions must be met:

If a thing is to become a good, or in other words, if it is to acquire goods-character, all four of the following prerequisites must be simultaneously present: 1. A human need. 2. Such properties as render the thing capable of being brought into a causal connection with the satisfaction of this need. 3. Human knowledge of this causal connection. 4. Command of the thing sufficient to direct it to the satisfaction of the need. (p. 52)

For example, if an employer is in a desperate need for labourers to complete an important task or project that will generate high returns, the implication is that the usefulness and importance of the employees will increase, which will result in higher wages or bonuses. In the same way, the

increase in desire for goods will, over time, result in the increase of value. Therefore, the labour, capital and resources do not determine the value of goods. It is the conditions of use that are important, according to Menger (2007):

Whether and under what conditions a thing is useful to me, whether and under what conditions it is a good, whether and under what conditions it is an economic good, whether and under what conditions it possesses value for me and how large the measure of this value is for me, whether and under what conditions an economic exchange of goods will take place between two economizing individuals, and the limits within which a price can be established if an exchange does occur. (p. 48)

Value is dynamic and can change as a result of numerous variables such as culture, context, nostalgia, preference and scarcity. Culture determines what type of food is desirable. Contexts are unique and consist of various aspects, for example, geography, climate and vegetation, that make certain goods more useful. In colder climates, warmer clothes and heating will be more desirable, while in warmer places air conditioning is more essential. These criteria are governed by marginal utility, which means that a person will value something in relation to what is owned; for example, if I stay in a warm place and I have enough refrigeration capacity for my needs and excess capacity, the excess capacity will be less valuable to me but more valuable to others who have no refrigeration capacity.

In Matthew 20:1–16, the return of the landowner to the marketplace to employ more workers is not explained, and it is traditionally assumed that he returns because of charity by providing wages for the unemployed. He is therefore aware and understands the desperation of the people, which gives him the upper hand to do as he wishes with his money. Alternatively, it is possible that the landowner did not employ enough labourers (owing to inexperience or shrewdness) to do the work that was required to complete a possible important task. The urgency to complete the task could explain why he returns multiple times to the market to employ labourers, thereby each time, proportionally to his need, increasing the value of the people employed. The marginal utility of labour explains that the value of labour probably increased as the day progressed because the task for the day was not yet done. The labourers who worked more hours could therefore ignorantly perceive the generosity of the landowner as unjust because they probably do not have the bigger picture of the project that required completion in mind. Subsequently, the increase in value of labourers who worked fewer hours is an indication of the fairness of the landowner who displays his appreciation through equal wages for all, without discriminating according to the time people worked. This view is supported by Derrett (1974) and Bailey (2008), who argue that the parable is possibly set in the harvest time and that the Sabbath is possibly approaching, which makes the urgency to finish the work very important, and therefore the value of the labour increases. This is corroborated by Van Eck and Kloppenborg (2015:3), who argue that the recurring hiring of more labourers throughout

the day aligns with harvest practices described in papyri from Roman Egypt. The vintage period required extra workers (up to 40 per 100 *iugera* – 25.3 ha) because after picking, the grapes had to be pressed to avoid rotting. Notwithstanding pressure during harvest time, viticulture was the most labour-intensive agricultural activity, requiring 16 permanent workers for 100 *iugera* (Van Eck & Kloppenborg 2015:4).

In addition to the new perspectives opened by the subjective theory of value, the agricultural context of the parable is another factor that is important to consider; it may provide insight into the charity of the landowner which the labour theory of value cannot explain. Smith (WN II.v.12) highlights the work of French physiocrats and the benefit of agriculture in the creation of value. The theory is that agriculture has three basic components to create value, namely land, labour and nature. Caton (1985:835) explains that ‘the labor of agriculturists is assisted at every turn by nature. Sun and soil convert seed to corn; livestock convert vegetation to milk and meat’. The land is the basic resource and asset of ownership that may vary in terms of agriculture in soil quality, climate and so forth. Labour assists with the increase of the usefulness of the land (by adding materials such as fertiliser) and production of goods (e.g. harvest of fruit). Finally, there is a mysterious ingredient that is not determined by the labour used to cultivate the land: it is *nature* itself that assists in the growth and production of goods. Value can be understood as the complex connection between land, climate, biology, chemistry and the fortitude (assuming the absence of pests or disasters such as drought) of growth itself. This adds an extra element to the determination of value that does not require additional capital, material or goods. This increase in value is not reflected in the labour theory of value, which retains the argument that the value of labour is directly linked to the value of goods. This has important implications for the interpretation of Matthew 20:1–16 from the perspective of subjective theory of value and agrarian theory, because it clarifies the charity of the landowner.

There is another element that must not be forgotten, namely that agriculture is highly connected to land, community and sociability (Thompson 2008). There are also traces of this in the work of Smith. Dwyer (2005:662) notes that Smith’s ‘economics was subservient to his ethics’ and that his ethics was ‘saturated by a sociability that could never be reduced to self-interest’. Both economics and ethics are rooted in sociability. This element of sociability and the closeness to the land in agriculture also extend the nature of value beyond a quantifiable value, because it adds an existential dynamic of meaningful labour.

The subjective theory of value highlights the possible increase of wages among the labourers hired at different times of the day based on the use-value of the labourers. Nevertheless, the exorbitant generosity of the landowner is not solely understood from the perspective of the subjective

theory of value. It seems that other motives are also involved that influence his remuneration strategy and generosity. Agrarian theory of value accentuates that the mysterious elements that Smith refers to as nature and community are also important to determine value. When nature and the larger communal distribution of wealth are added, the potential value of the goods produced by the vineyard will probably be much higher than as determined by the labour theory of value. The profit the landowner will make increases from the perspective of agrarian economics, although it is not clear what specific tasks he has in mind for the labourers who were the labourers who were the extra people employed at various times during the day, or whether it was a once-off event caused by an error in judgment. It therefore makes complete sense that the landowner is viewed as charitable because he shares the excess or product that will be gained from production with the labourers (and indirectly with the larger community). This is therefore not only a matter of use-value and charity. It is also about community and sharing. So the question is, why did the landowner not reimburse the indignant labourers if he is so charitable?

The charge of the disgruntled labourers in the parable and the response of the landowner in v. 16 could be understood from the perspective of meaningful labour in the agricultural context (De Crom & Rothmann 2018). The money is their focus, and it makes their labour meaningless although they are paid a negotiated wage. Agrarian economics implies a space of sharing and charity, which is not recognised by those who were hired first because they do not understand the dynamic of an agrarian community and the alignment of the landowner with these communal values. Their loss is the meaningless labour they performed – the first will be the last (v. 16). This agrarian system of value is supported by Vearncombe (2010:235), who states that the agrarian setting of the parable enables the '[...] reciprocal solidarity with persons of a much lower social status'. The meaning of sociability goes beyond the monetary determination of value and reward. The final sentence of the parable is placed in focus by this reference to meaningful work and the agrarian context. The word κλητοί refers to [invited or summoned ones], and this makes sense in the context of hiring a multitude of labourers. However, not many find meaning in this occupation, such as the workers hired first, who fail to recognise that they are ἐκλεκτοί: [chosen out, selected or elected] for the task of finding meaning associated with the agrarian context of sharing and community. In this way, the agrarian context of the parable is a powerful metaphor for the kingdom of heaven and its value system.

## Conclusion

Matthew 20:1–16 was interpreted in this article by using labour and subjective theory of value and agrarian theory to shed some light on the exuberant generosity of the landowner in this parable and the indignation of the labourers hired first. To address this problem, the interpretation history of the parable was reviewed to locate the contribution of this article

in the history of interpretation. The phenomenological approach informed by theories of value did provide an explanation for the indignation of the labourers hired first and the divergence in the remuneration strategy followed in the parable. Unfortunately, it does not provide more insight into the generosity of the landowner. This failure is mainly because of the limitations of the labour theory of value.

Subjective theory of value attempts to address these limitations by focusing on the use value of goods and marginal utility. From this perspective, and complemented by agrarian theory, it was discovered that the difference in wages does make sense based on the use-value of goods. Thus, the use-value of goods clarifies why all the workers received the same wage. However, the exuberant generosity of the landowner still did not make sense, nor does it explain why the indignant labourers were not reimbursed for their work. The agricultural context provides perspective and a possible answer. The roles of nature and sociability are important aspects in agrarian economics because they add value beyond labour and the use-value of goods that could increase the quality and quantity of produce and possible profit. The generosity of the landowner can therefore be viewed as compensation for the labour or use-value of the workers. Finally, meaningful work in agriculture adds the dimension of community. This is something the labourers hired first did not appreciate, because they were singularly focused on the money others received without finding meaning in the agrarian ethic and appreciating the culture of sharing. Their indignant attitude is important because it underscores their failure to comprehend the larger economic and agrarian ethics. Although these workers might not be conscious of the economic realities of running a profitable vineyard because they are probably in a survival mode of existence, these economic aspects are important for the survival of any business. Agrarian ethics accentuate a sharing culture where people in poor communities learn to care for each other because they understand what it means to be in need.

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### Author's contributions

M.R. is the sole author of this research article.

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## Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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