



An African Biblical interpretation of Matthew 20:1–15 in relation to social justice for workers in Cameroon

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Abstract

After the colonial era in the early sixties, the practice of employing and paying workers in Cameroon both in the civil service and in the private sector became very crucial, considering the fact that the situation of unemployment is so endemic to Cameroon as a paradigm for Africa's unemployment. From an economic perspective, Cameroon has a booming labour force, but this robust manpower has been underutilized due to the provocative unemployment that is experienced in all sectors in the country. As an agrarian economy, the weakness of industrialisation in Cameroon does not offer mass employment alternatives. Those who have the privilege to be employed are not satisfied with their remunerations to the extent that they try to use unorthodox means to add to their pay through corruption. This article highlights the desperate nature of Cameroonian workers through the lenses of Matthew 20:1–15. It is a society of unfair distribution of resources and this creates an imbalanced society between the privileged and non-privileged peasantry.

Keywords

social justice; workers; African Biblical Interpretation; Matthew 20:1–15; parable of the Workers in the Vineyard

1. Introduction

Biblical exegesis had for a long time in the past been read by Africans from the perspective of the West. By so doing, the contextual and socio-spiritual problems of Africa were partially or left unaddressed and Africans were bound to read theology and exegesis rather than do theology and exegesis (Green 2009:iii).¹ When people are tuned to ‘read’ theology, they turn to consider biblical texts as foreign, far and remote. When they are engaged in “doing” theology, they appropriate biblical texts and thus use them to their own advantage (Nyiawung & Van Eck 2013:2). It is thanks to the forerunners of African descent like Justine Ukpong (2000), Anum (2001), Adamo (2006), Loba-Mkole (2008) and West (2009), that a contextual approach to biblical texts called African Biblical Hermeneutic Approach (ABHA) has been postulated and implemented (Speckman 2016:211). These forerunners of African Biblical Hermeneutic took to read the Bible from an African context, from African traditions and histories to illuminate the meaning of a text in a communal life (Dube 2005:126). The need for this present methodology is compelled by the awareness that Scripture speaks to people differently, depending on their context. Andrew F. Walls describes this awareness as the indigenising principle which states that: “Each community recognises in Scripture that God is speaking to their own situation, which means that (in ABHA) there is the desire to indigenise. To live as a Christian and yet as a member of one’s own culture or society” (Walls 1996:7).

Every society of people in the world have their own worldview and the world-view of a people is one key to understanding why a particular group of people act the way they do (O’Donovan 1996:3). It is from this premise that Bediako (2000:3) has made the assertion that Christianity is a universal religion and that in the 21st century Africa has become the heart land of Christianity. Thus, an African contextual approach to exegesis has become very imperative. An interest in biblical hermeneutics from the African world view is also expressed by Ogbonnaya (1993:117) who describes the African worldview as “the sense of community, the fact that

1 Dube (2005:126) has stated that the problem could have resulted from the fact that African biblical scholars of the last twenty years were trained in European and American schools and methods.

the life of the individual human person finds meaning and explanation in terms of the structure of relationships within the human community.” This article is a response to a quest for a biblical theology of social justice for workers in Cameroon and specifically workers of the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon (PCC)² through the lenses of the parable of workers in the vineyard (Mt 20:1–15).

The article is presented in three main sections. First, consideration is given to the practice of social justice towards workers in Cameroon and the PCC³, an insight into the ABHA approach. Second, the African context for understanding Matthew 20:1–15 in respect to workers in Cameroon. Third, the reading of the parable of workers in the vineyard from the African context and finally a conclusion.

2. The practice of social justice towards workers in Cameroon and the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon

A worker in Cameroon under section 1(2) of the General Provisions of the labour code⁴ means any person, irrespective of sex or nationality, who has undertaken to place his services in return for remuneration, under the direction and control of another person, whether an individual or a public or private corporation, considered as the “employer.” Section 2, paragraph I and II of the labour code states that: “The right to work, is a basic right of each citizen. The State shall therefore make every effort to help citizens to find and secure their employment. Work is a national duty incumbent on every able-bodied adult citizen.” So it is difficult to associate the labour provisions with the actual labour practice in Cameroon. Nyamnjoh (1999:107) has observed that the Cameroon system of employing workers

2 The Presbyterian Church in Cameroon (PCC) is the constitutional successor of the Basel Mission Church in Kamerun established in 1886 as an external arm of the Evangelical Missionary Society of the Basel Mission in Switzerland. She maintains the spiritual and theological continuity of that Church and upholds the Reformed Tradition (PCC constitution 1998:1)

3 The PCC is chosen as an example because the author (Godlove Sevidzem Ntem) is an ordained minister and New Testament lecturer at the Presbyterian Theological Seminary Kumba-Cameroon.

4 Cameroun Labour Code Law No. 92/007 of 14 August 1992.

has little regard for virtue and meritocracy and proves to have more room for loyal mediocrity than critical excellence.

Nyamnjoh (1999:105) further asserts that, Cameroon runs a type of political system that can be referred to as the politics of regional or ethnic balancing. In this system, a worker appointed to high office or merely aspiring to such an office is made to understand that the system, incarnated by the leader is very benevolent, and that the leader is to be thanked for any appointment. The policy creates the illusion in the elites, and in the masses that everything is possible and that individuals must give the leader total support if they wish to maintain, or climb to high offices and get the favours that go with it (Nyamnjoh 1999:106).

Another serious problem which is endemic to Cameroon and which seems to paralyse social justice in the employment of workers is bribery and corruption. Competitive entrance examinations into many of the prestigious professional schools in Cameroon seem to be a formality. Those who have the money are sure to secure a chance for their family members. Government scholarships for the intelligent students have long ceased to exist and therefore merit is no more one of the criteria for employing workers in Cameroon. Gerddes-Cameroon (1999:79) has made investigation on corruption in Cameroon and found out that the poor employment opportunities, the salary slash, the poverty of the people and the poor conditions in which they work, can neither be the cause of, or the justification for corruption. Corruption exists because individuals have not acquired the habit to fight for their rights by rallying together to claim their rights from those whose duty is to guarantee them the political authorities. This collective mobilisation is in itself a political act, a result of democracy, because it is a form of dialogue between the leaders and the masses (Gerddes-Cameroon 1999:81).

The policy of employment of workers in the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon (PCC) which is a well constituted church, states that: “employment shall be based on merit but however; priority shall always be given to committed Presbyterian Christians who believe in what the PCC stands for” (PCC book of Orders 1995:52). The employment of pastors takes the form of a competitive entrance examination into the lone Presbyterian Theological Seminary (PTS) Kumba-Cameroon. The PCC as an indigenous

church is firmly rooted in the two English speaking regions in Cameroon. The Church as well as other religious bodies that operate in Cameroon has silently adopted the contemporary political syndrome of regional and ethnic balancing in the employment of workers which is a serious threat to social Justice. This idea of regional and ethnic balancing is carefully crafted into the constitution of the PCC, Article 112 on election of Moderator and Synod Clerk which states that “the Moderator and Synod Clerk shall not be indigenes of one and the same Region of the Country”. It is therefore not an overstatement to say that nominations for these clerical high offices are more about regional affiliation than about merit. In the biblical text under consideration, there is no indication in the parable of the Workers in the Vineyard (Mt 20:1–15) that the owner has in mind any idea about ethnicity or racial boundaries which could have affected the employment of workers. It is for this reason that he is seen by some interpreters as just and righteous (Jeremias 1972:37; Inrig 1991:182; Schottroff 2006: 210).

Students who are admitted into the PTS automatically become church workers upon graduation. The beautiful aspect of social justice is that all students who are admitted on the scholarship of the church are given an equal basic monthly allowance.

Another threat to social justice in the employment and appointing of workers in the PCC is that the more power is centralised, giving a greater capacity for corruption and abuse, as in Lord Acton’s dictum, “All power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” This is true for all authority, civil as well as ecclesiastical (Sorensen 2010:5). Neyrey (2005:467) has expressed a similar idea on “patronage and reciprocity” from the first-century Mediterranean world where a patron gives an appointment or a favour to a worker and expects a balanced reciprocity in the form of money, honour and loyalty.

3. An insight into the ABHA approach

This article does not intend to suggest that ABHA is better than other hermeneutic approaches, but it is an alternative approach that paves the way for effective studies in African theology. The African biblical hermeneutic approach focuses on the context of the audience, making use of the results from other methods of exegesis and applying them to the realities of the

African context. It takes its roots from the contexts of biblical writings, before emphasising the relevance of the “message” to the African people in their context. It is about how issues raised in the Bible can be interpreted and addressed within the social, cultural, and religious context of Africa (Nyiawung & Van Eck 2013:2). Thanks to the forerunners of African descent like J.S. Mbiti (1986), Justine Ukpong (2000), Anum (2001), Adamo (2006), Loba-Mkole (2008) and West (2009), who proposed a contextual approach to biblical texts called African Biblical Hermeneutic Approach and implemented it (Speckman 2016:211).

It is a rereading that considers biblical texts as a challenge to African theologians, specifically in this generation of instability where solutions are being sought for, to the various problems that plague African societies especially Cameroon that is currently in a civil war orchestrated by the Anglophone crisis. There are two methods that are involved in the use of ABHA: (a) the Inculturation method (IM) and (b) the African Biblical Interpretation method (ABI). This article will employ the second method, the African Biblical Interpretation (ABI) method that will be used for the reading of the main text in the context of social justice for workers in Cameroon. The reason for this approach is compelled by the awareness that Scripture speaks to people differently, depending on their context. Andrew F. Walls describes this awareness as the indigenising principle which states that: “Each community recognises in Scripture that God is speaking to their own situation, which means that (in ABHA) there is the desire to indigenise. To live as a Christian and yet as a member of one’s own culture or society” (Walls 1996:7).

4. The African context for understanding Matthew 20:1–15 in respect to workers in Cameroon

The contextual world of Jesus in which the parable of the Workers in the Vineyard was told is different from the African context both in time and space. The African context is being treated as the referential world in which Matthew 20:1–15 will be interpreted. This article assumes that, even though African societies have a wide variety of peoples whose life ways differ greatly, matters of context are basically similar in Cameroon like in all other countries in Africa particularly south of the Sahara.

Youth unemployment is a very serious contextual problem in Cameroon like in most of Africa. Cameroon youths have the aspirations to become active citizens and to contribute to their countries' development. They have been calling for more rights, more opportunities and for their voices to be heard because the transition into adulthood means to have the right skills and opportunities to access decent work (ILO 2012:2). There is a mismatch between higher education, vocational and professional training, and skills development and what the job market actually needs. Schools and universities are providing mass education rather than quality service (ILO 2012:7) and young people are acquiring knowledge where their services are not needed in their communities.

Another challenging contextual issue is low wages of workers. McCoy (2008:675) describes wages as hygiene factors that motivate performance, morale, and the ability of employers to attract and retain staff. Cameroonian workers who live in the rural areas tend to supplement their poor wages by engaging non-financial income activities like farming locally grown food (Delancy 1989:124). Low wages cause dissatisfaction with the working conditions and this loss of motivation cause workers to migrate towards higher earning jobs. If the employees have a negative perception of their working conditions, they are likely to be absent, have stress-related illnesses, and their productivity and commitment tend to be low (Sheikh Ali *et al.* 2013:3).

Exploitation of workers that has been masterminded by human trafficking for forced labour is a dehumanising issue for Africa workers. This has been a painful reality for African societies for decades where men, women and children are exploited in domestic services, such as cooks, cleaners, gardeners and nannies and their pay package is never commensurate to the work that they do because working hours have no limit (Rani & Saluja 2017:18). Exploitation makes workers to grumble and there is no job satisfaction. Grumbling is an unjustified characteristic which is found in the parable of the Workers in the Vineyard. The early workers who grumbled because of their equal payment with the one-hour workers in Matthew 20:12 might have felt exploited by the vineyard owner.

Cameroon, like many African countries, is rife with corruption. It cuts across all sectors, be they the Public or Private sector and, not even the

church is free of corruption (Bechem 2018:2). Ndi (2002:22) proposed that corruption is caused *inter alia* by low salaries⁵, non-respect of the laws in force,⁶ display of wealth and power, concentration of power in the hands of a few, unrealistic promises, inadequate democracy, impunity enjoyed by some people. More so, Ndeh (2015:6) alludes to the level of corruption that goes on in the recruitment of workers in the public service in Cameroon. He says that if one doesn't have a "god father"⁷ who is a member of government and who knows the house so well then one can hardly be recruited as a public servant. This system has established a kind of framework where the best brains that have no protectors are poor and joblessness in the face of prevailing mediocrity.

Marginalization of the minority, in the view of Forbang-Looh (2018:81), deals with putting people in an inferior or peripheral position in such a way that they lack power and thus, cannot influence decisions. In most cases marginalisation results from dehumanised oppression of the marginal by those who are at the centre of decision making. Minorities as groups are those who are numerically inferior to the rest of the population of a state. Such minority groups possess ethnic, religious, or linguistic characteristics differing from the rest of the population and who have a sense of solidarity directed towards preserving their culture, tradition, religion, or languages (Rindap 2014:91). There are many forms of human marginalization, but that which is so endemic to Cameroon is the Anglophone marginalization. An Anglophone is permanently on exile even in his home. Given the linguistic divide between the majority Francophones and the minority Anglophones, this division has proven to be one of the most divisive factors

5 The economic crisis, currency devaluation and salary-cuts from 1993 brought a lot of hardships on Cameroonians. Even though corruption was veiled somehow before then, but in their quest to maintain their former standards of living, many resorted to receiving bribes, while others misappropriated public funds for their private interests (Nganji 2002:23).

6 Norms for the award of contracts and recruitments are not followed but people instead bribe to get contracts and to be recruited in services where they might not have expert knowledge (Ndeh 2015:6).

7 God father in this sense is a closed person who can protect one's interest. The doctrine of "god fatherism" has destroyed the state machinery because it has perpetuated incompetence and mediocrity in the public service. Those who are appointed may not be the best in terms of quality and experience rather they are those who have protectors in the public service (Ndeh 2015:6).

in Cameroonian politics (Dicklitch 2011:160). Konings and Nyamnjoh (1997:207) believes that the root of this problem can be traced back to 1961 when the political elites of two territories with different colonial legacies, one French and the other British, agreed on the formation of a federal state. In a situation of marginalization, there is no social justice.

Civil wars in Africa are a deadly contextual issue that has scare many workers to abandon their jobs for fear of their lives. In Cameroon, ethnic conflicts have been recorded again and again. Some include *inter alia* the Mbesa-Oku ethnic violence, caused by land boundary dispute of 14th to 15th February 2007 (Nke 2007:2); the June 1995 ethnic conflict between Bafanji and Balikumbat (Monteh 2018:287) all in the North West Region of Cameroon. At the moment, the government of Cameroon is at war with the Anglophone population unless their “Extremists” laid down their arms (Dah 2019:97). The socio-political crisis that began in October 2016 in the Anglophone North West and South West regions mutated into an armed conflict at the end of 2017.

Crisis Group Africa Report (2019: i) reports that about seven armed Anglophone militias are currently in positions of strength in most rural areas in the two restive regions. The security forces reacted with repression and since mid-2018 they have been heavy casualties on the separatists and the military. Government forces have however, not been able, to neither regain full control over rural areas nor prevent repeated separatist attacks in the towns. The crisis has become a deadlock, notably that for over three years now thousands of people have been killed and hundreds of thousands have been displaced and close to a million are seeking refuge abroad. To this effect, peasant farmers are not free to go to their farms resulting into food scarcity. Numerous lockdowns and ghost towns have prevented workers in the civil service and in the private sector from going to work in the restive regions, and there is general apathy. People are sick and cannot go to hospital because of lack of money and worst of all the regions are heavily militarised and people live in fear. Against this backdrop of ongoing conflicts, displacement, and violence, how does one begin to engage in discourses of social justice (Taylor 2013:16)? The children of Anglophone extraction living at home have been out of school for four years, a regrettable situation indeed.

5. The reading of the parable of workers in the vineyard from the African context

Neyrey (1991: xvi) opines that every historical interpreter approaches the biblical text with some model of society and social interaction in mind. It was earlier noted that ABI is a rereading that considers biblical texts as a challenge to African theologians because it presents a paradigm shift because of the new demands emanating from the various questions raised by Africans in their quest to appropriate biblical texts. Essentially, it seeks to make a to-and-fro move from: reader – text – context (as in the “traditional” approaches) to, new context (African) – new text (contextualised text) – new reader (African reader). This is practically done by the utilisation of models of the African context for an effective interpretation of Matthew 20:1–15.

The equivalence to vineyards (Mt 20:1) in Africa is plantations. Only rich elites in Africa can afford to establish a plantation. Common plantations in Cameroon are rubber, palm oil, cacao, banana, and cotton which are all cash crops meant for export. Most of the plantations are owned by the government and one of the characteristics in the establishment of plantations in Africa is land grabbing (Simo 2011:4). Simo argues further that while traditional and modern elites clearly play significant roles in land grabbing in the North West region of Cameroon today, so too, do government agro-allied industries such as the CDC, PAMOL and UNVDA. Contrary to the African sense of human dignity and solidarity, some elites and government companies that are involved in plantation agriculture refuse to pay their workers, leaving them in want. The vineyard owner in Matthew 20:1–15 demonstrates an exemplary character of a humane person and is portrayed as a just and trustworthy person (Kistemaker 2007:74).

Viewed from the model of African solidarity, the African idea of meeting at the community centre is analogous to the idea in Matthew 20:3–6 where the vineyard owner went out at the third hour (Mt 20:3), at the sixth hour and the ninth hour (Mt 20:5) and finally the eleventh hour (Mt 20:6) and found people standing at the market place (agora). Most community centres in African villages are equally marketplaces. If the incidence that is described in the parable of the Workers in the Vineyard were in an African community, it will be normal that many people, some of whom are also

job seekers will be found in the community centres for the whole day. From an African world view, the early worker who expected more during payment but indignantly received the same one denarius and grumbled (Mt 20:11) would have quickly formed a solidarity group for one person to present their grievance. This can be seen from the fact that none of the first workers had a contrary opinion to the complaint of injustice. Many African peasant farmers may be poor like day-labourers in the Mediterranean world, but African solidarity has ensured that none in the community should be a beggar (Ezenweke & Nwadiolor 2013:64). The African idea of interdependence is a fundamental principle of life because a tree does not make a forest. This ideology of interdependence recognizes that unity is strength. It promotes discipline, reduces crime, and humanises relations. The action of the vineyard owner to pay those who were hired last the same as those who were hired first (Mt 20:14) coincided with the African sense of solidarity with the less privilege.

The African sense of human dignity takes into consideration, those job seekers who were standing at the marketplace in Matthew 20:3, 6 and were discussing. When seen from an African world view, they would have been sharing their life experiences with each other and looking for suggestions and solutions together in the process of waiting for a job opportunity. In an African community, this will be a normal pattern with the African sense of free communication. Standing at the market place all day long as noted in Matthew 20:6 is analogous to the situation of high unemployment which is characteristic of Africa and Cameroon in particular where the unemployed are in a weak position and desperate to the extent of accepting any work at any price just to make a living because they have no bargaining power (Schottroff 2006:131). Day-labourers in Africa are ready to do such jobs as: construction labourers, gardeners, house cleaners, hired farm workers, dishwashers, car washers, and cooks (Ruiz 2007:21). The vineyard owner behaved more like a good African patron who could help people without demanding immediate or an exact equivalent work. Again, the owner demonstrated the African philosophy of live-and let-live by paying all the workers the same amount (Mt 20:14) so that they can feel a sense of human dignity by realising their meal for the day. Finally, the owner had a humane attitude and made his late workers to feel a sense of belonging.

Due to the African model of respect and integrity, if the vineyard owner (Mt 20:8) were in an African community, he would have been endowed with a respectable title. He is a landowner and needs workers for his farms as a Cameroonian traditional ruler, title holder or elite does. He is so generous by paying his workers who work only for one hour a wage that can feed their families and not necessarily a deserving wage. As traditional leaders in their communities, Fons are endowed with the responsibility to feed those who are in danger of starvation. Fons have the sole authority to be generous as they desire without fear of interrogation (Mt 20:15) so far as it is for the good and service of his people. It is strictly forbidden for subjects to grumble⁸ when the Fon speaks and gives out orders. Those who do so are seen as potential dangers to the “throne” of the Fon and are suspects of evil eye carriers. This explains why Fons as African patrons are sacred and have divine authority linked to the land and the supernatural spirits that own it (Lang 2018:61). The vineyard owner in the text questions the prerogative of the grumbler: οὐκ ἔξεστίν μοι ὁ θέλω ποιῆσαι ἐν τοῖς ἐμοῖς; ἢ ὁ ὀφθαλμός σου πονηρός ἐστίν ὅτι ἐγὼ ἀγαθός εἰμι; “Is it not permissible for me to do what I want with things that are mine? Or is your eye evil because I am generous?” (Mt 20:15). Conclusively this will mean that if this parable were told in an African setting, the vineyard owner would have been first an elderly⁹ person and one with similar characteristics to that of a Fon or other African patron of respect and integrity.

It is not strange from the perspective of African moral values that people who are waiting to be employed (Mt 20:3–7) present themselves in the village square which is the community centre and discuss together while in the process of waiting. Their discussion may be based on sharing their life experiences and also the latest news and happenings in the community. When they meet, there is nothing like “mind your own business” but they

8 One of the common characteristics of the Grassfield culture is the traditional religious belief that land is the ownership of the Supreme Being. This explains why traditional functionaries such as a Fon exercises spiritual control over the land as a representative of the Supreme Being. Hence, to grumble against the Fon’s orders, is to grumble against the Supreme Being.

9 Strictly speaking the term “elder” may not necessarily refer to an old person, but one who has been charged with special duties such as leader of people, “family head” traditional, religious or political leader. A Fon may be a young man but by his portfolio, he has become an elder.

see themselves as one person sharing common problems. When they meet once or twice, they start to see themselves as brothers of a common heritage. If any of them is bereaved or have an occasion to celebrate, others, by dint of the fact they are friends come to condole and to celebrate and an invitation is not needed. From the African viewpoint, Husien and Kebede (2017:60) affirm that moral principles are primarily concerned with the maintenance of good relationship with others as opposed to the maintenance of justice and individual rights in the West.

In Africa, what is right is what connects people together; what separates people is wrong. The workers who are called from the “agora” to go to work in Matthew 20:3–7, could easily go and start working without any prior arrangement of the wages because they trusted that their patron will not deceive them. In an African setting this will not be a problem because an elder of that calibre is expected to behave himself particularly towards those who are struggling to survive in life.¹⁰ If he refuses to pay this will become a community matter and everyone will talk about it. Basically, this accounts for the fact that African morality is concerned with the goodness of all human beings. Consequently, the essence of goodness and good life in African traditional thought has to do with doing well and not to harm others (Husien & Kebede 2017:60). The generous attitude exhibited by the owner in Matthew 20:14 would have been a very welcomed and recognised way of behaviour in Africa. In Matthew 20:11, the early workers grumbled because the action of the vineyard owner (paying everyone the same) contrasts sharply with their natural thoughts and this brought a crisis and confusion. This can be likened to a kind of moral crisis that African morality is facing which contradicts with previous moral code and leads to confusion.¹¹

Concerning the model of time reckoning, from an African setting, the owner of the vineyard who went out to look for workers (Mt 20:6) would

10 What enforces African morality is the awareness that ancestors, who are moral archetypes are watching. In the other world, the significance of the ancestor consists in that they watch over the affairs of the living member of the family; helping and punishing the delinquent (Husien & Kebede 2017:62).

11 Eitel (1986:1) describes the present African as someone between two worlds: unable to part with the old and not yet of the new world. In a limbo between these two worlds a dichotomy permeates his moral behaviour.

have done so in three phases. He would have gone out in the morning at sunrise, and at overhead sun (the whole afternoon period), and at sunset which spans in the whole evening period. The grumbling about the one hour put in by the last workers would not have been the issue, but that they started work at sunset. Workers who begin work at sunset when the heat of the day has gone down are known to do commendable work. African peasant workers are conversant with target work. A person can arrange for work, but he decides which period of the day that he will do the work. Morning periods and evenings are most preferable because Africans live in the tropics where the sun is so hot during the overhead sunny day. Those who were employed at sunset would have come in with fresh energy and worked to the satisfaction of the owner. Ecclesiastes 9:11 makes reference to a similar situation: “I have seen something under the sun: the race is not to the swift, or the battle to the strong, nor does food come to the wise ... but time and chance happen to them all.” Coming to work in the evening would not have been a surprise to African peasant workers because sunset is still an appropriate period of work.

The text has also presented a situation which is similar to the African non-verbal communication. Non-verbal communication is concerned with those issues which happen in the text which are not said but only seen through actions. They could happen due to human action or natural actions. In Matthew 20:3, 6, and 15 the people who are standing at the marketplace and discussing and waiting in that context of a shame culture like that of the Mediterranean world can well be understood by Africans as a non-verbal communication for job seekers. African peasant labourers do not seat in the house and wait for jobs to meet them at home, but equally come to public places and share their wishes and predicaments with others. When the first workers saw that the last ones to be employed have just receive one denarius, they could have quickly communicated their expectations of an additional pay with their eyes as Africans will do. Eventually when their expectations were not meet when they receive their own share of remuneration of one denarius, they could have likely used the same facial non-verbal expressions to communicate a general sense of disapproval, anger, contempt and disgust, which one of them now presented verbally saying: “These who were hired last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us ...” (Mt 20:12). Again when the first workers

complained, they received the response: “Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money or are you envious because I am generous?” The grumblers must have gone away without offering a word as a non-verbal sign of accepting the challenge with no further case of argument.

While the early workers could have been going away with a gloomy face of dissatisfaction, the last workers would have been smiling as a non-verbal mode of satisfaction and joy (Mt 20:9). In an African setting, these kinds of gesticulations would have been normal and well expressed. Aboh (2015:29) argues that every culture and social group has its own body language used for communication. These nonverbal gestures serve as very important communicative tools in Matthew 20:1–15, in the sense that sometimes a character may not be easily moved to talk. It is through these non-verbal means that ideas, emotions, and messages could be passed. This section concludes that users of facial expressions and body language in general should endeavour to be careful in their use of gesture so that gestures should not be translated to mean something else without clear understanding of the context of usage and the culture of the people.

6. Conclusion

This article is a quest for a biblical theology of social justice for workers in the light of Matthew 20:1–15 from a Cameroonian perspective using an African biblical interpretation. A large percentage of the twenty-first century African societies like Cameroon are agrarian. Even though the Cameroonian economy has been praised for its boisterous growth rates, it is ironical that this growth rate has not been translated into jobs so as to have any reasonable impact on poverty in the country. This has resulted into high unemployment which remains a major developmental challenge in Cameroon and Africa at large.

The author sets out to show that, in a society of unfair distribution of resources, social justice becomes a problem in employment and remuneration of workers. This has been done from the perspective of Matthew 20:1–15 using an African Biblical Interpretation method. In three phases, the article first examined the practice of social justice towards workers of the PCC as a church and the workers in the civil service in Cameroon. The African context for understanding Matthew 20:1–15

has been investigated from the perspective of youth unemployment, low wages of workers, exploitation of workers, corruption, marginalisation of the minority and the on-going civil war in Cameroon. The models for interpreting the text of Matthew 20:1–15 from an African context that are used in this article are: the African sense of solidarity, African human dignity, a sense of respect and integrity, African moral values, African time reckoning and a sense of non-verbal communication. It is hoped that the parable of the workers in the vineyard has been used to illicit the issue of social justice to situate a number of contemporary issues that animate the African worldview and particularly Cameroon.

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