

**A Dialogue between Matthew 20:1-16 (the Prodigal Employer)
and Ku Kim's *My Hope***

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Introduction

Once again, an Indonesian man with a white bandage on his ring-finger came to my office where I was volunteering as a labor-counselor at the Galilee Presbyterian church in Seoul, Korea, back in 2005. 'No, please do not uncover...' I busted in my heart, but the pastor asked him to proceed. Then, there it was, another cut finger. He lost a tip of his finger while working. A few weeks later, his case was resolved after the pastor contacted the boss while working with a professional labor counselor. He received compensation, \$800, for his cut finger, and his belated wage for the last month, \$400, which the employer was reluctant to give.

"*The laborer deserves his wages*" (1 Timothy 5:18). True. He got his money. But, I marveled at how a part of one's body and a month of his construction labor can be paid off with that little money. Another lingering thought kept haunting me, after I saw another Pakistani male repeatedly saying, "I wished I could hit him," while I was listening to his case: 'What if they were fellow Koreans?' The case would have been somewhat different. They received their wages, but they were not paid enough and further treated badly, because they were immigrant workers who could not speak Korean well and above all outsiders to Korean society.

In other words, "*The laborer deserves his wages*," this seemingly infallible statement often serves labor exploitation in the global context, especially as it is joined with migration. On the one hand, as we see above, have-nots migrate to the so-called first world countries and are often stuck in menial labor. On the other hand, haves migrate to the so-called third world countries and make profits by paying less for the labor of have-nots. For example, Richard M. Locke writes after observing subcontractors of Nike in Indonesia that "minimum daily wage only covered 70% of the basic needs of one individual" and pinpoints that "Nike's Korean suppliers were seen as especially stingy with wages and abusive to local workers."¹ Since consumers prefer paying less in buying, while producers wish to make more profits in selling, no one seems able to deny that some sort of exploitation inevitably happens in the labor market of the immigrants.

This paper, however, introduces an alternative ethos based on Matthew 20:1-16 and *My Hope* by Ku Kim, a founding father of the Korean government. My paper argues that the basic human need and, at the same time, the utopian vision of giving should govern labor ethics over the dominant exploitation model. For this enterprise, the paper first briefly explores the background of exploitation of *the other* in western philosophy and its biblical counterpart in the Hebrew Bible. Second, it shows how Matthew 20:1-16 gives another paradigm, "*Laborers*

¹ Richard M. Locke, "The Promise and Perils of Globalization: The Case of Nike," MIT Working Paper IPC-02-007, July 2002, p. 10. Locke continues "One worker at Nagasaki Para Shoes, a Nike contractor, said that she and other Indonesians were 'terrified' of their South Korean managers: 'They yell at us when we don't make the production quotas, and if we talk back they cut our wages.'" Richard M. Locke, "The Promise and Perils of Globalization: The Case of Nike," p. 10.

deserve their food,” by locating the basic human need above the logic of exploitation and military power in the Roman imperial setting, and how the prodigal employer reverses three commonly accepted work ethics (equal pay, competition in employment, and goodness). Third, the paper explains how Ku Kim under two imperial powers, Japan and the U.S., overcame their dominant logic of exploitation and military power with his own vision, which is the fulfillment of basic human need and the utopian vision of giving, like that of Matthew 20:1-16. Fourth, the paper explores in what ways this alternative labor ethics can be applied in Asian/Asian immigrant context to overcome the dominant logic of exploitation.

Exploitation of the Other in Western Philosophy

Why is labor exploitation widespread in the immigrant context? What justifies exploiters taking advantage of people? Its root is not just in a socio-economic desire for more money but in a philosophical dimension influenced by western philosophy: ‘Humans can be objects.’

After Descartes, a pioneering figure in modern philosophy, humans are considered to have the ability to think for themselves apart from God. Thus, he concludes, “*Cogito ergo sum.*” This was not only a liberation process for humans but also an alienation process from nature. “Humans became an essentially different being from nature,”² because they became the subject of investigation, while turning nature to *the other*, the object of investigation. For example, a Swedish botanist, Carolus Linnaeus (1707-1778) categorized the living world into five categories –“class, order, genus, species, and variety”³–and gave names to plants and animals, while placing humans above all other living creatures. This action was a first movement toward justifying exploitation of nature.

After Hegel’s *Dialectic* was introduced, that sees human history as a constant struggle between thesis and anti-thesis which produces synthesis and thus advances to the higher level, this alienation process extended even to different human groups. In this Hegelian thought, there have been fights in history between human reason and superstition, between civilization and barbarism. Thus, people who are not civilized, which means not *westernized*, became an anti-thesis over against a thesis, western civilization. They have to be overcome. Other non-western, primitive tribes were considered not as humans but as “animals that do not have human reason.”⁴

This other-ing process that sees other ethnic group as an inferior object was backed up by modern science in the colonial setting.⁵ For example, Georges-Louis Buffon (1707-1788) writes that “the white man meaning the normal man who truly represents humanity, has grown progressively blacker in a tropical climate and can recover his original normal color by returning to the temperate zone.”⁶ A Dutch anatomist, Pieter Camper (1722-1789) dissected a Southeast Asian great ape, Orangutan, from Indonesia which was the Dutch colony. He “compared Europeans, Africans, and central Asians (Kalmucks) with a monkey and an orangutan” and said “I produced a Negro physiognomy, and definitely the profile of an ape, of a Chinese, of an idiot

² Jin Kyung Lee, *Philosophy and a chimney sweeper* (Greenby: Seoul, 2005), p. 43.

³ Charles Loring Brace, “*Race*” is a four-letter word (Oxford University Press: New York, Oxford, 2005), p. 25.

⁴ Jin Kyung Lee, *Philosophy and a chimney sweeper*, p. 178.

⁵ Gay L. Byron similarly defines ethnic-othering in literature as follows: “Ethnic-othering was a common literary tool used to stereotype and slander those perceived as threats (e.g., religious, military, economic, etc) within ancient world.” Gay L. Byron, *Symbolic Blackness and Ethnic Difference in Early Christian Literature* (Routledge: London and New York, 2001), p. 2.

⁶ Benjamin Isaac, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity* (Princeton University Press: Princeton and London, 2004), p. 9.

in proportion as I inclined this same line more or less to the rear.”⁷ It is not only plants and animals but also other humans who are under normal humans – white westerners. Those inferior humans, therefore, are also objects of exploitation as well as investigation like plants and animals.

This other-ing and degrading process for other humans is accelerated when labor is involved, because of the power dynamic which is created between employers and employees. Racial and ethnic difference reinforces exploitation of labor even more when the employer is in a different racial or ethnic group from the majority of employees, as is witnessed earlier in the case of Indonesia and Korea. It is not only the possession of the means of production but also the employer’s distorted feeling of superiority that justifies his/her abusive acts toward employees.

Counter Response from the Hebrew Bible

In contrast to modern western philosophical thought, the Hebrew Bible presents an opposite labor ethics. Humans are not the object of exploitation, but the object of divine compassion, as is often addressed in Exodus and the Prophets.

First, in Exodus, YHWH’s intervention which brings the Hebrews out of Egypt is initiated by labor exploitation. When YHWH first calls Moses in the burning bush, YHWH says that YHWH heard the cry of the people because of their oppressor (*nagash*: taskmaster (NRSV), slave driver (NIV)) and knew their suffering (Exodus 3:7). YHWH saw how the Egyptians oppressed the Israelites (Exodus 3:9). They were ruthless (Exodus 1:14). Moses, thus, is sent to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians (Exodus 3:8). Second, exploitation of foreign laborers is a main cause of YHWH’s judgment upon Egypt. The Israelites used to be neighbors, but after their number had grown, they were no more fellow human beings but a potential threat in the eyes of the Egyptians (Exodus 1:10). Here happens once again an other-ing and degrading process seeing those foreign Israelite workers as outsiders and objects of exploitation like animals – ‘They are not part of us, let us use them’: “they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor” (Exodus 1:11 NRSV). The Israelites were bitter (Exodus 1:14). Therefore, YHWH brings judgment upon Egypt (Exodus 6:6). Third, YHWH is identified as the deliverer from forced labor. The Israelite will know YHWH as the one “who has freed you from the burdens (*skalat*: burden carrying, compulsory labor) of the Egyptians” (Exodus 6:7). YHWH is God who is compassionate and never ignores the suffering of foreign laborers.

God’s concern for laborers is not limited to the Exodus narrative, but is extended to Israel’s prophetic tradition. For example, Isaiah condemns Israel’s fasting, because while fasting they exploit their workers (Isaiah 58:3). Jeremiah proclaims that reforming the way of their life in order to live in their own country in the face of Babylonian threat is “not to oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow” (Jeremiah 7:6). Likewise, Zachariah says, “do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor” (Zechariah 7:10). Amos also adds the word of judgment for those “who oppress the poor and crush the needy,” they “will be cast out toward Harmon” (Amos 4:3). Finally, Malachi makes sure that on the Day of Judgment YHWH will bear witness “against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien” (Malachi 3:5). This stream of God’s compassion for laborers and foreigners does not end in the Hebrew Bible but continues into Matthew’s Gospel as well.

Matthew 20:1-16 (the Parable of the Prodigal Employer)

⁷ Charles Loring Brace, “Race” is a four-letter word, p. 33.

Matthew 20:1-16, often called the *Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard*, is placed at the center of Matthew's three episodes where Jesus teaches about "the last being first and the first being last."⁸ In Matthew 19:13-30, Jesus says, after the rich young man left him since he could not give up his possessions and thus gave up following Jesus, "Many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first" (Matthew 19:30 cf. Mark 10:17-31). Immediately following this episode, Matthew 20:1-16, the second episode which is not found in Mark, also concludes with the same point: "the last will be the first, and the first will be the last" (Matthew 20:16). In the third episode, while rejecting the request of the mother of the sons of Zebedee, Jesus reaffirms his teaching. "Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant" (Matthew 20:26 cf. Mark 10:35-45). Afterwards, Jesus, being the ultimate exemplar of these stories, enters Jerusalem where he will be crucified.

But, there emerge two questions. First, why did Matthew insert Matthew 20:1-16 into Mark's storyline? Daniel J. Harrington, however, points out that "the only point really in common comes with the order of payment in 20:8."⁹ Latecomers receive their wage first, while early comers receive their wage last. Then, second, what is the function of the pericope whose main point actually does not fit with its last statement (Matthew 20:16)? Is this a mistake for Matthew to place the present pericope where it is now? To resolve this hermeneutical tension, Mark Allen Powell insists that Matthew 20:1-16 is Jesus' answer to his disciples who expected to receive more reward, since they abandoned their possessions unlike the rich young man.¹⁰ Daniel J. Harrington argues that the parable concerns the last judgment and "defends Jesus' special concern for the marginalized in Jewish society."¹¹

While providing valid readings, these commentators miss a crucial factor in understanding this parable, the Roman Empire. They disregard Matthew's socio-economic concern. Here I present a socio-economic reading of Matthew 20:1-16 and argue that Matthew 20:1-16 presents an alternative labor ethics placing the basic human need over against the logic of exploitation in the Roman imperial setting and reverses even commonly accepted labor ethics.

First, Matthew 20:1-16 presents God as a prodigal employer. The householder (*oikodespotes*) in verse 1 is God, because it is soon revealed in the Parable of Tenants (Matthew 21:33-46) that the Lord (*kyrios*) of the vineyard in Matthew is the God of Israel who will lose His own son. In this parable, however, God seems to be not just but unfair and even wasteful. The owner gives the same wage, one denarius, to his workers regardless of the length of their labor. He even gives it to those who worked only for an hour. In this sense, as Harrington puts it, this parable can be called "the Parable of the Prodigal Employer," as Luke 15:11-32, the Parable of the Prodigal Father, demonstrates "the generosity of God."¹²

Second, the prodigal employer places basic human needs over against the dominant paradigm of exploitation in the Roman Empire. Warren Carter observes that there are two major means for the ruling elites to control locals and maintain their wealth in the Roman Empire: the use of military might and taxation. Those newly migrated "Roman soldiers or local landowners, often using forced or slave labor, enhanced the productivity and profitability of their land."¹³ Furthermore, the Romans imposed an enormous amount of tax upon locals. For example, Lenski

⁸ Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Sacra Pagina (Liturgical Press: Collegeville, Minnesota, 2007), p. 283.

⁹ Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Sacra Pagina, p. 283.

¹⁰ James L. Mays, Edited, *Harper Collins Bible Commentary* (Harper One: New York, 1988), p. 892.

¹¹ Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Sacra Pagina, p. 284.

¹² Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Sacra Pagina, p. 284.

¹³ Warren Carter, *Matthew and Empire Initial Explorations* (Trinity Press International: Harrisburg, PA, 2001), p. 14.

argues that “up to two-thirds of peasant production was paid in rents, tolls, and taxes,” and Oakman also argues that “half to two-thirds of production was paid in taxes in first-century Palestine.”¹⁴ In other words, their labor was often forceful, and the tax was burdensome. Therefore, like “the great majority of peasants who lived in the various agrarian societies of the past” Carter concludes that peasants in the Roman Empire “lived at, or close to, the subsistence level.”¹⁵ Nevertheless, they could not resist this oppressive system, because “Rome regarded the failure to pay tax and tribute as rebellion against Rome’s sovereignty,” and revolt was immediately “put down with military force.”¹⁶ In other words, the dominant labor ethics at that time was exploitation through taxation and military might. It is this socio-economic context in which Matthew 20:1-16 should be read. The employer, therefore, has to give one denarius to everyone regardless of their working hours, because that was necessary for their living and for their family’s living. He had to be wasteful in order that every bit of his possession may not be wasted.

Third, the prodigal Employer presents an alternative labor ethics by reversing commonly accepted labor ethics. There are three distinct labor ethics in Matthew 20:1-16 that reverse that of the Roman Empire. 1) The Employer is driven by compassion not by economic gain. The employer is the one who seeks. It is not employees who come to workplaces and ask for a job but the Employer who constantly goes out and finds workers. He went out five times – at an early morning hour, the third hour, sixth hour, ninth hour, and eleventh hour. He seeks the benefit of workers not of himself. Unlike Roman ruling elites who often used forced labor at cheap cost for their benefit, the employer uses his resources to provide necessities for his employees. It is the desperation and compassion of the Employer not for the lack of the labor force but for the joblessness of those poor peasants that drove him out in the street. 2) The ultimate standard for pay is the human life with dignity. The Employer applies another criterion of equal pay. While looking at latecomers receiving their wage, early comers expected to receive more, because they worked almost ten times more. Their mind was operating on the principle of equal pay. But, the employer reverses their expectation and thus the notion of equal pay. Everybody gets paid equally not for their work, but for their life. They deserve their food. 3) Goodness is redefined. Even though his intention was good, it was impossible to avoid grumbling of early comers. They thought that it was unfair. Rather than dealing with fairness, he describes himself as good (*agathos*), because goodness is determined not by mathematical calculation but by generosity for those who are weak and marginalized in society. The latecomers were probably those who were physically weak or sick or simply not favorable, which caused them to stay standing in the street rather than being picked in the early morning. The Employer redefines goodness as having compassion for them and gives and shares what he has voluntarily.

Fourth, Matthew 20:1-16 functions as the central piece in a broader narrative, Matthew 19:16-20:28, which criticizes the dominant labor ethics in the Roman Empire. In Matthew 19:16-30, the rich young man is unable to follow Jesus, because he was unable to give. On the contrary, Matthew 20:1-16 presents the prodigal Employer who is willing to give what he possesses. The hidden criticism in the first and second pericope is revealed on the surface in the third pericope, as Jesus says to his disciples, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them” (Matthew 20:25). Matthew concludes this set of Jesus’ teachings with strong negation, but gives an alternative ethics through the lips of Jesus who

¹⁴ Warren Carter, *Matthew and Empire Initial Explorations*, p. 135.

¹⁵ Warren Carter, *Matthew and Empire Initial Explorations*, p. 18.

¹⁶ Warren Carter, *Matthew and Empire Initial Explorations*, p. 15.

exemplifies his teaching in the generous giving of his own life: “It will *not* be so among you, but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant . . . just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:26, 28).

Ku Kim’s *My Hope*

This alternative labor ethic is also found in Ku Kim’s *My Hope* where Kim also opposes exploitation but holds up basic human needs and a utopian vision of giving as an alternative labor ethics under the colonial context.

Ku Kim is a founding father of the Korean Republic. He was also one of the main figures who established the Provisional Government of the Republic of Korea in Shanghai in 1919. During Japanese Imperialism in Korea, he participated in the resistance movement against Japan. After the Second World War and the independence of Korea from Japanese colonialism, the United States army and Soviet Union army arrived in Korea as trustees, while dividing the country in half, North and South. He devoted his life to establishing a unified government in the Korean peninsula until he was assassinated in 1948.¹⁷ Ku Kim’s *My Hope* is an appendix to his diary, *Baik-Bum-Il-Ji*, written in 1947. In this appendix, he describes the nation he dreams of:

I hope that my country becomes the most beautiful country in the world. I do not hope that we become the strongest nation. Because we suffered from the invasion of another nation, I do not want my country to invade another nation. I am content, as long as we are wealthy enough to live with dignity and strong enough to depend the invasion of the other. Only thing I long to have is the cultural power, because the cultural power will make us happy and make others happy.¹⁸

There are found four points worth noting. First, colonization, which is an extreme form of migration and exploitation, is the context of his writing. Since he experienced forced labor and taxation under Japanese Imperialism, Kim urges his fellow Koreans not to harm other countries. The liberation from Imperial power is still a dominant theme, although his work was written in 1947 after the liberation from Japanese colonialism in 1945. U.S. and Soviet Union military power became another Imperial power in the Korean Peninsula. Thus he repeatedly says in the beginning of *My Hope*, that “My hope is the complete independence of Korean nation.”¹⁹ Third, he limits gaining of wealth while securing the basic human life. He does not wish to have much wealth but to make sure that every human being needs necessary supplies for their living. Fourth, he values culture more than economic and military power that mutually work together in an exploitive imperial system. The cultural power that he longs for is not something that dominates others, but something that serves them in the act of giving:

Now, what humankind needs is neither military power nor economic power...the fundamental reason why humankind are unhappy is because we lack righteousness, mercy, and love...we are not the ones who steals nor takes advantage of others but the ones who take delight in giving to our family, our neighbor, and fellow citizens...Therefore, we are not lazy but diligent. The householder who has beloved wife and children is inevitably diligent in order to give endlessly.²⁰

¹⁷ For more detailed information on the life of Ku Kim, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kim_Gu

¹⁸ <http://kimkoo.or.kr/02diary/sub.asp?pagecode=m02s02t04b>

¹⁹ <http://kimkoo.or.kr/02diary/sub.asp?pagecode=m02s02t04>

²⁰ <http://kimkoo.or.kr/02diary/sub.asp?pagecode=m02s02t04b>

Ku Kim defines Korean nationality as loving which is expressed in voluntary giving. Koreans are diligent workers, because their aim is to give not only to their own family but also to their neighbor and fellow citizens who are in need. This utopian vision of giving is the ultimate cultural power that he wanted the newly born nation, the Korean Republic, to have.

Dialogue: Toward Alternative Labor Ethics in Asian (American) Immigrant Context

Matthew and Ku Kim, even though they lived under colonial power, present the two common labor ethics: supplying basic human needs and generous giving. Forced labor and unreasonable taxation took place when the Romans migrated to Palestine as a ruling class with military power. It also happened in Korea, when the Japanese invaded Korea and colonized the Korean Peninsula. Similarly, when one migrates to another country for labor either as an employer or employee, exploitation often takes place, as is happening in Korea, Indonesia, Pakistan, the United States, and many other countries.²¹ It is often the distorted view toward other ethnic groups as inferior that justifies employers' injustice. However, the Parable of the Prodigal Employer and Ku Kim's *My Hope* offer an alternative labor ethic that can be applied not only to Korean immigrants in North America and developing countries but also to pan-Asian immigrants who share a colonial history.

The Parable of the Prodigal Employer and Ku Kim's *My Hope* are mutually complementary in constructing a new labor ethics. On the one hand, Ku Kim's *My Hope* fills up the void of employee ethics that the Parable of the Prodigal Employer misses. Ku Kim encourages all laborers, employees as well as employers, to work diligently. On the other hand, the Parable of the Prodigal Employer supplies the common identity that *My Hope*, a Korean nationalistic writing, misses. The fundamental impulse that motivates believers to practice new labor ethics is not only love for humanity but also their Christian identity.

In the Asian-immigrant context, those two writings are particularly illuminating in constructing a new labor ethics. They remind us that, 1) there is a danger in the labor market treating other ethnic groups as objects and thus exploiting them like old colonizers. In this new labor ethics, however, 2) employers are driven not simply by economic gain but by compassion for their employees. 3) Employers are aware of the basic needs of their employees. 4) Employers give away what they have to take care of them. 5) Other employees do not grumble, because it seems unfair to them. Rather, 6) they work more diligently for the greater good, giving endlessly.

Conclusion

Where there is migration for labor, there often exploitation occurs. It is primarily driven by materialistic desire, but it is backed up by western modern philosophy that sees other humans and nature as objects of exploitation. On the contrary, the Hebrew Bible depicts YHWH as a compassionate God who delivers aliens and laborers, while judging their ruthless employers. This tradition also continues in Matthew 20:1-16. This somewhat disturbing pericope which describes God as an unfair and wasteful employer can be understood, when it is read in the Roman Imperial context. Matthew is presenting Jesus' teaching as an alternative labor ethics against exploitation, which was the dominant ethos of his time, through the means of taxation and military power. Through the Parable of the Prodigal Employer, Matthew illustrates that God

²¹ For Pakistani child labor in stitching Nike soccer ball, see Richard M. Locke, "The Promise and Perils of Globalization: The Case of Nike," p. 11-13.

places basic human needs over material gain and enacts generous giving. Ku Kim also holds up those two values in *My Hope* in the colonial context, while focusing on love as the motivation for giving. These two writings complement each other and present an alternative labor ethics that is applicable in an Asian immigrant context.

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