


'The harvest is plentiful but the workers few': Reflecting on the verisimilitude of Q 10.2

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Dates:

Received: 07 July 2022

Accepted: 10 Aug. 2022

Published: 20 Oct. 2022

How to cite this article:

Howes, L., 2022, "'The harvest is plentiful but the workers few': Reflecting on the verisimilitude of Q 10.2', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 78(4), a7912. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v78i4.7912>

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This study considers the verisimilitude of the harvest saying in Matthew 9.37–38 and Luke (Q) 10.2, specifically the opening statement that the harvest is plentiful but the workers few. By 'verisimilitude' is meant the tradition's tendency to be viewed as realistic in its original socio-historical context. In other words, would the first listeners have nodded their heads in agreement at the claim that the harvest is plentiful but the workers few? The focus here is not on the logion's possible metaphorical application, but on the literal saying, which involves ancient agriculture. To address the verisimilitude question, the study will consider some individual features of the logion itself, as well as the socio-historical context of farming and harvesting in 1st-century Palestine and the Roman Empire.

Contribution: This study attempts to determine the verisimilitude of the literal claim that the harvest is plentiful but the workers few. The author is not aware of any other study that attempts to answer this verisimilitude question about Matthew 9.37–38 and Luke (Q) 10.2. Answering this question is sure to contribute to the understanding and interpretation of the chosen logion in the future.

Keywords: agriculture; harvest; literal; mission discourse; reapers; Sayings Gospel Q; workers.

Introduction

This article will consider the verisimilitude of the harvest saying in Matthew 9.37–38 and Luke 10.2. Kloppenborg (2006:278) used the term 'verisimilitude' to describe a parable's tendency to be viewed as a realistic narrative in its original socio-historical context. Although most scholars would not regard the harvest logion in Matthew 9.37–38 and Luke 10.2 to be a parable,¹ the author is yet to come across a scholar who does not regard this saying as intrinsically metaphorical. As such, commentators and exegetes mostly focus on the saying's metaphorical interpretation and those who do pay attention to its literal meaning do so only in passing with one or two generic comments about agriculture in Palestine and the ancient world. The present study focuses exclusively on the literal side of the harvest logion. In other words, the focus will not be on the saying's metaphorical application to missionary work and apocalyptic judgement but on the literal imagery of harvests and workers in 1st-century Palestine. To the author's knowledge, no study has been dedicated to determining the verisimilitude of the *literal* claim that the harvest is plentiful but the workers few. To be clear, this study does *not* attempt to argue that the logion should be interpreted literally instead of metaphorically. The study also does not intend to proffer an interpretation of the logion at all. The focus of this study is on the isolated logion, not on the mission discourse as a whole or the relationships between the different occurrences of the logion in the Sayings Gospel Q, the Synoptics and the Gospel of Thomas. These are all important avenues of research that will be taken up in future publications, but for now the focus is solely on the verisimilitude of the literal statement in Q 10:2 that the harvest is plentiful but the workers few.

There is widespread agreement that the harvest saying in Matthew 9.37–38 and Luke 10.2 belongs in the Sayings Gospel Q (e.g., Bultmann 1968:145, 325; Roth 2018:274). The International Q Project provides the following reconstruction and translation of Q 10.2 in their *Critical Edition of Q* (eds. Robinson, Hoffmann & Kloppenborg 2000:160–161, 2002:96–97):

... λεγε ...² τοῖς μαθηταῖς αὐτοῦ· ὁ μὲν θερισμὸς πολὺς, οἱ δὲ ἐργάται ὀλίγοι· δεήθητε οὖν τοῦ κυρίου τοῦ θερισμοῦ ὅπως ἐκβάλῃ ἐργάτας εἰς τὸν θερισμὸν αὐτοῦ.

1. Some exceptions of scholars who do indeed regard Q 10.2 as a parable, include Roth (2018:274–286) and Zimmermann (2015:187, 202, 365).

2. The Critical Edition of Q features λεγε not because they maintain that the imperative verb λέγε stood in the original, but because these Greek letters overlap between Matthew's λέγει and Luke's ἔλεγε.

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He said to his disciples: The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. So ask the Lord of the harvest to dispatch workers into his harvest.

In particular, the focus here will be on the opening statement that the harvest is plentiful but the workers few. Would the original hearers have nodded their heads in agreement at this claim? To answer this question, one must determine which harvest Jesus was referring to. Was it a legume or spice harvest, for example, or was it just a generic reference to harvests in general? Was he speaking of a particular farm or the situation in 1st-century Palestine generally? When or on what occasion did Jesus find it necessary to make this statement and injunction? One can easily imagine Jesus addressing his disciples on or near an actual farm, pointing to the harvest in front of them and observing that it is sizable but also noticing that there does not seem to be many labourers to bring in this fortunate yield. Conversely, it is also possible to imagine Jesus making a more generic statement at a location far removed from an actual farm about harvests and agricultural workers. Other questions also come up when considering the saying's verisimilitude. What is the reference of τοῖς μαθηταῖς, that is, who was Jesus's audience? If one farm is intended, what kind of farm is it, a smallholding or a large estate? Which of these options fit the saying and the historical context better? If the saying refers to the situation in Palestine more generally, would there be any reason for these harvests to be larger than usual? Likewise, would there be any reason for agricultural workers in 1st-century Palestine to be scarce? In short, what were the contextual circumstances under which Jesus would have uttered the opening statement that the harvest is large but the workers few? What was the agricultural situation in 1st-century Palestine?

To answer these questions, this study will consider not only some individual features of the logion³ itself but also the socio-historical context of farming and harvesting within 1st-century Palestine and the Roman Empire. Having analysed the text and reconstructed the context, it should be possible to provide a reasoned answer to the overarching verisimilitude problem and associated subproblems. The article starts off looking for clues in the logion itself that might help answer some of the given questions, then reconstructs the socio-historical context within which the logion was uttered and finally addresses the verisimilitude question directly.

A farm or a region?

The generic nature of the opening statement would seem to suggest that Q's Jesus is here speaking of the general situation in Palestine, not one farm. If a specific farm were in view, one would have expected more specific information, like the type of produce. Was it a wheat, barley, legume or spice farm? Or was it an orchard or vineyard? The logion does not say. On a particular farm, one might also expect the landowner and/or farm manager to be known by name, like Lamon, the estate manager, and Dionysophanus, the farm owner, in Longus's

3.A 'logion' is here understood as a saying attributed to Jesus.

Greek story, *Daphnis and Chloe*. Instead, Q 10.2 uses the vague and enigmatic term 'master of the harvest' (κύριος τοῦ θερισμοῦ). The saying further fails to identify the workers more narrowly. The noun 'worker' (ἐργάτης) most commonly refers to an agricultural worker or husbandman (Liddell & Scott 1996 s.v. ἐργάτης; Horsley 1999:243; Rollens 2014:156; Roth 2018:278; cf. Mt 20.1, 2, 8; Ja 5.4). This meaning is confirmed by the threefold occurrence of the noun 'harvest' (θερισμός) in Q 10.2. Yet the saying fails to indicate whether these 'workers' are servile or free, hirelings or neighbours, residents or drifters. Consider, for example, Strabo's use of the same noun, ἐργάτης, in *Geographica* 16.4.153 to identify purple-dyers from Tyre. Rollens (2014:156) understands the term ἐργάτης in Q 10.2 as denoting day-labourers specifically, including struggling and dispossessed peasants (cf. Kloppenborg 2006:288, 329). The choice not to identify the produce, workers or 'master' more narrowly all speak against the idea that a particular farm is in view. In fact, the word 'farm' does not even appear in the logion but is merely implied by the presence of a harvest. Moreover, if a specific farm were intended, one would have expected the tradition to appear in the form of a *chreia* or anecdote, introduced by a description of Jesus and his disciples gathering on someone's farm and perhaps pointing to the harvest. The logion's non-specificity makes it relevant and applicable in different contexts, which was probably the speaker's intent. To be sure, non-specificity was a common technique in ancient wisdom sayings (and other small forms) for this very reason.

It follows that the saying is most likely commenting on the situation in 1st-century Palestine more generally, as opposed to commenting on some or another specific farm. This makes perfect sense because the intended audience of this logion would have had little use for a comment about a specific farm's generous yield and its lack of workers. Conversely, a comment about farming in ancient Palestine would have been directly relevant and applicable to the same audience. This is accurate because Q's audience was mostly from the lower segments of society, including especially the poor and the small peasantry (Park 2014:78; see Horsley 1995a:44; 1999:260-261, 269, 296-298; Reed 2000:136-137; cf. Arnal 2001:150, 173, 188; Freyne 2000:206; Häkkinen 2016:7; Oakman 1986:100). It is true that the audience of Q 10.2 is identified specifically as the disciples of Jesus, but in the Sayings Gospel Q the term 'disciples' (μαθηταί) does not necessarily refer to the Twelve. More likely, it refers to the general followers of Jesus who listened to his sapiential message during his life on earth (cf. Horsley 1999:262). The same is true for Q 10.2 (cf. Kloppenborg 1996:45). And the general followers of the historical Jesus, like the audience of Q, were predominantly made up of the marginalised, the poor and the small peasantry (Rohrbaugh 1993:33, 38; cf. Oakman 2008:38). The state of agriculture in 1st-century Palestine affected these people directly.

There is, however, a complication with the finding that Q 10.2 speaks to the situation in 1st-century Palestine more generally, as opposed to a specific farm. After the opening statement that the harvest is plentiful but the workers few,

the logion continues to speak of *one* 'master' and *one* 'harvest', which would seem to suggest that only one farm is in view.⁴ Is it possible that the saying moves from a generic context involving all of Palestine to a narrower context involving just one farm? When the saying opens with a statement about the harvest being plentiful and the workers few, it is not yet clear whether this applies to a particular farm, a *chôra* (like the area surrounding Sepphoris), a Roman province (like Galilee), the Jewish promised land (i.e. ancient Palestine) or the entire Roman Empire. Before hearing the admonition, there might already be speculation in the audience or crowd about the veracity of the claim that the harvest is plentiful and the workers few. To evaluate the opening statement's veracity, the crowd would necessarily consider the political and economic status quo of local agriculture. It is only when the admonition to 'ask' follows in the second leg of the logion that the context is identified more closely as one farm. The logion therefore seems to deal with a *hypothetical* farm (not an *actual* farm) as representative of Palestinian agriculture more generally. If the *setting* for the logion is a hypothetical farm, its *backdrop* is ancient Palestinian farming. As such, one should not imagine Q's Jesus or the historical Jesus on an actual farm commenting on its yield and workforce but instead imagine him calling to mind the idea of a Palestinian farm to say something with broader applicability against the backdrop of Palestinian agriculture. If this is correct, the 'master of the harvest' is a stock character representing other 'harvest masters' in the region and the hypothetical group of 'workers' likewise represent similar groups of workers bringing in the harvest on farms all over Palestine.

Agriculture in 1st-century Palestine

Was the overall agricultural yield in 1st-century Palestine indeed large and the labour force indeed small? Compared with Greece and Rome, both the overall yield and the workforce were certainly much smaller although the harvest of a Galilean town might have been comparable to the harvest of a rural Greek town, and the number of workers relative to the size of the harvest might also have been similar. However, Jesus and his audience would not have been familiar with agricultural practices and yields outside of Palestine. Instead, they would have compared concurrent harvests with previous harvests to measure their relative success or size. A better question might therefore be: was the overall agricultural yield in 1st-century Palestine indeed greater than before and the labour force indeed lesser than before? To answer this question, one must determine whether there were any developments and changes in Palestinian agriculture during the 1st century – and indeed there were.

According to Jewish tradition, Yahweh owned the promised land and bestowed it upon Israel so that his chosen people

4. One does well to bear in mind that the 'master of the harvest' could be overseeing multiple farms, so the identification of just one 'master' and just one 'harvest' does not necessarily imply just one farm. Yet even if the 'master of the harvest' owned and/or managed multiple farms, it would still not include a whole geographical region such as Palestine or Galilee. At most, one could speak of the harvest yielded on a particular assortment of farms owned or managed by the same person.

could survive from its produce, as Deuteronomy 8.10 explicitly states: 'And you shall eat and be full, and you shall bless the LORD your God for the good land he has given you' (ESV; cf. Borowski 2002:10, 21; De Vaux 1965:164–165; Kloppenborg 2006:12, 38–39). This made agriculture the primary means of corporeal survival in ancient Israel, as in the rest of the ancient world and even more so (Josephus, *Ag. Ap.* 1.60; cf. Aberbach 1994:126, 176; Arnal 2001:102; Fisher 1998:197; Garnsey 1998:135; Hanson & Oakman 1998:97, 104; Oakman 2008:57; Shaw 2013:6). King and Stager (2001:85) wrote: 'Agriculture, the basis of the economy in ancient Israel, influenced practically every facet of daily life, especially the religious, economic, legal and social spheres' (cf. Aberbach 1994:176; Aubert 1994:117; Borowski 2002:6, 14; Hanson & Oakman 1998:97; Oakman 2008:56, 98; Stegemann & Stegemann 1999:7, 42, 104). From the time of the Judean monarchy onwards, smallholdings came under increasing threat from wealthy landowners, jeopardising people's livelihoods (see De Vaux 1965:167; Dever 2012:243–244; cf. Aberbach 1994:6–7; Kloppenborg 2006:284; Oakman 2008:68, 102; cf. Is 5.8; Mi 2.2). Some peasants already started losing their smallholdings during this time (De Vaux 1965:76). De Vaux (1965) wrote:

The rich landlords would speculate and defraud others (Os 12.8; Am 8.5; Mi 1.1f.), the judges took bribes (Is 1.23; Jr 5.28; Mi 3.11; 7.3), and the creditors knew no pity (Am 2.6–8; 8.6). (p. 73)

During the monarchy, the elite households of Jewish kings, armies and religious leaders made use of adjoining, conquered and royal lands, as well as taxation, tolling and tithing to skim off the top, sustain their institutions and participate in interregional trade (Borowski 2002:8; King & Stager 2001:193; cf. Am 5.11). Kings would also seize agricultural lands directly from peasants and bestow them to their military officers and others (De Vaux 1965:164; cf. Kloppenborg 2006:39, 284; cf. 1 Sm 8.14). Exploitative activities by the Jewish kings were condemned in the prophetic tradition and elsewhere (Oakman 2008:102; e.g., 1 Sm 8.11–18; 1 Ki 21). All of this was indeed exploitative and parasitic but not detrimentally so (cf. Kloppenborg 2006:38–39). According to King and Stager (2001:193), 'there is little evidence of large-scale poverty among the tribesmen and peasants during the monarchy'.

However, the situation changed with the passage of time and got especially dire and dreadful during the Greco-Roman period (see Kloppenborg 2006:38–39, 284–290; cf. Stegemann & Stegemann 1999:108, 110–111, 113–119, 126–127). Whereas earlier practices seemed to follow traditional laws that prohibited the charging of interest, expected the forgiving of debts every Sabbatical year and required appropriated lands to be redeemed to their original owners during Jubilee (De Vaux 1965:73, 167, 170; Oakman 2008:24, 2015:74; see Borowski 2002:21, 23–25; cf. Hezser 2005:90; Jacobs 2018:125; cf. Lv 25; 2 Ki 8.1–6; Jr 32.6–44), the 1st century saw Palestinian elite bypassing these laws (see Arnal 2001:140–141; Boer & Petterson 2017:97–100; Oakman 2008:17–19, 24, 139–140, 225–227, 2015:72–74; Stegemann & Stegemann 1999:112–113;

cf. Drake 2014:236–237; Ford 2016:21, 30, 32, 36; Häkkinen 2016:3; see m. Šeb 10).⁵ In earlier periods, it was common for landholders to own numerous scattered plots, perhaps because they wanted to diversify, but more likely because they had to make use of what was available for appropriation or purchase (cf. Silver 1983:23). During the 1st century, large estates and cash cropping became significantly more common features in Palestine (cf. Aberbach 1994:104, 171; Arnal 2001:132, 141–142, 147–150; Kloppenborg 2006:292; Rollens 2014:156). Ernest van Eck (2016) wrote:

Archeological evidence and passages in Josephus indicate that during Antipas's reign more and more of the land in the Judean hill country was transformed into large estates owned by absentee landlords. (p. 27)

What is more, Palestinian tribute to Rome added another layer of taxation in addition to the taxes and tithes extracted from the peasantry during the Hasmonean dynasty (cf. Hanson & Oakman 1998:62–64, 96, 107–108; Stegemann & Stegemann 1999:47, 49, 110, 117). With Rome, the Herodian family and the Jewish elite all taking a piece of the pie, significant percentages of agricultural goods were collected from the peasantry and redistributed among the rich during the 1st century CE (Park 2014:85, 86; cf. Boer & Petterson 2017:93; Horsley 1999:222–223). Even if there is no positive evidence of double taxation (from both the Romans and the Jewish elite) or triple taxation (from the Romans, the Jewish elite and the Herodians) in Palestine during the 1st century CE (cf. Oakman 2008:23; Reed 2000:89), it is unlikely that the addition of both a Roman overlord and Herodian client rulers would not have increased existing levels of taxation (see Oakman 2008:19–23; cf. Horsley 1995b:53, 59, 118, 139–140, 218–219, 1999:53, 58, 115; *pace* Arnal 2001:142–150). In Galilee, the elite was able to extract taxes, tithes, rents and other fees from the peasantry much more effectively and regularly during the 1st century CE because of the reestablishment of Sepphoris and particularly the foundation of Tiberias (see Arnal 2001:101, 142–150). If Douglas Oakman's (1986:72) estimations are correct, taxes and rents could amount to between one half and two thirds of a peasant's overall harvest, leaving much less produce for daily survival (cf. Häkkinen 2016:2; Ukpong 2012:200).

As a result of these heavy financial burdens, many small peasants were forced into indebtedness leading up to and during the 1st century CE, which initiated a downwards spiral of control by creditors, loss of land, starvation and ending up as tenants, day-labourers, wage workers, beggars, bandits and the landless poor generally (Arnal 2001:139–140, 141–142, 146, 149–150; Fisher 1998:199; Freyne 2000:205; Garnsey 1980b:39; Häkkinen 2016:3, 7; Hanson & Oakman 1998:81, 111, 113; Hezser 2005:300; Horsley 1995a:43, 1995b:60, 215–216, 219; Oakman 2008:21, 25, 33, 224; Park 2014:86; Rollens 2014:23, 156; Stegemann & Stegemann 1999:100, 112; Van Eck 2016:27cf. Q 19.12–5, 13, 15–24; Mt 6.12; 18.23–34; 20.1–15; Mk 12.1–11; Lk 12.16–20; 16.1–17; Thom. 21; *War*

2.427; *Ant.* 17.271). Even though CR Whittaker (1980:80) is correct that indebtedness and exploitative contractual arrangements were present in the provinces (including Palestine) long before Rome came into the picture, it is also true that exploitation and indebtedness increased dramatically in Palestine during the 1st century (Arnal 2001:140; cf. Stegemann & Stegemann 1999:47, 49, 51, 110). As a result, many peasants hired out their labour to supplement their income and pay off their debts, especially at harvest time (Arnal 2001:113, 141; Brunt 1990:713; Garnsey 1980a:3, 1980b:37–38, 42, 1998:138–139, 144; Hawkins 2013:348; Rollens 2014:156; White 1970:335, 336; cf. Aubert 1994:168; Burford 1993:186, 188, 191; Hanson & Oakman 1998:104; Joshel 2010:8; Kloppenborg 2006:252, 292, 307; Shaw 2013:31, 82, 87–88; Skydsgaard 1980:68, 69). Such debtors were known in the Roman world as *obaeratii* (Brunt 1990:704; Garnsey 1980b:36, 1998:137; White 1970:335, 368). Not all agricultural labourers were peasants who had recently lost their own smallholdings although many of them were (cf. Burford 1993:183, 186, 189, 190). Despite their backbreaking efforts, many peasants did end up losing their smallholdings to rich landlords (Stegemann & Stegemann 1999:43). We therefore see many struggling smallholders losing possession of their smallholdings to wealthy landowners during the 1st century CE. Landownership was a symbol of prosperity and the primary means of wealth creation in the ancient world, including Palestine (Arnal 2001:102, 139; Fisher 1998:196; see Aberbach 1994:164–165; see Oakman 2008:57–58; cf. Aubert 1994:117; Joshel 2010:35). Acquiring land was the main motivation behind lending to peasants (see Arnal 2001:139–140). Combining small farms into larger estates also had the usual advantages of economies of scale, enabling better use of labour and cheaper input costs. Wealthy landowners and landlords mostly lived in cities such as Tiberias, Sepphoris and Jerusalem,⁶ usually owning multiple estates (Arnal 2001:147; Boer & Petterson 2017:97–98, 141; Dube 2015:5; Freyne 2000:52, 99, 195; Häkkinen 2016:7; Kloppenborg 2006:137, 279–280, 300; Oakman 1986:78; Park 2014:85; Ukpong 2012:200; White 1970:353; cf. Aberbach 1994:165; Aubert 1994:120, 125–126; Horsley 1995a:42; Oakman 2008:251–252; Stegemann & Stegemann 1999:7, 12, 14, 132).

Some of these dispossessed peasants were allowed to remain on their smallholdings as tenant farmers, with ownership of the land reverting to the landlord (Aberbach 1994:167, 168; Boer & Petterson 2017:72; Oakman 2008:24; Stegemann & Stegemann 1999:43; see Hanson & Oakman 1998:110–111; cf. Burford 1993:194; Garnsey 1980a:4, 38, 39, 1980b:38; Joshel 2010:8). There was a noticeable increase in tenancy arrangements during the 1st century CE (Hanson & Oakman 1998:99; Kloppenborg 2006:314; Stegemann & Stegemann 1999:110; Van Eck 2016:27; cf. Arnal 2001:149–150; Brunt 1990:714; Hezser 2005:122). It was a deliberate strategy of the elite to push smallholders and even entire villages into tenancy arrangements (Boer & Petterson 2017:97; cf. Bradley 1994:74). These tenant farmers no longer owned the

5. Some argue that the Jubilee rule to return land to their original owners every 50 years was never followed in practice in Israel's long history (e.g. De Vaux 1965:175–177).

6. Some of these landowners might also have lived in Rome (Oakman 1986:78; cf. Häkkinen 2016:1), although the fact that Palestine was not *ager publicus populi Romani* before 70 CE would seem to speak against this.

smallholdings on which they farmed and had to now pay rent in addition to taxes and tithes, usually in kind during harvest time (Aberbach 1994:167, 168; Van Eck 2016:27; cf. Hanson & Oakman 1998:106, 111). What is more, many of these tenant farmers remained indebted despite losing their smallholdings, meaning that they had to continue paying off their debt as well (Garnsey 1980b:39; cf. Hanson & Oakman 1998:104). These obligations forced many tenant farmers to hire out their labour to other farms, in addition to their responsibilities on their appropriated plots (Boer & Petterson 2017:93; Garnsey 1980a:3, 1980b:42, 1998:138–139, 144; cf. Arnal 2001:113; Brunt 1990:705, 713; Hanson & Oakman 1998:109; Kloppenborg 2006:252, 308; Rollens 2014:156). Kloppenborg (2006) wrote:

Typically tenants were drawn from the sector of smallholders in need of additional income, landless peasants, and underemployed villagers. Leasing practices were designed to extract maximum labour outputs from such persons. The provisions of leases typically left tenants with a subsistence-level income, sometimes considerably less. (p. 252)

Not all peasants were lucky enough to remain on their smallholdings as tenant farmers (Garnsey 1998:139; cf. Burford 1993:194). Without their smallholdings, these dispossessed peasants had to find new ways of making a living and many of them did so by hiring out their services to available farmers, which would have included tenant farmers, farm managers and landowners (Garnsey 1998:139; cf. Bradley 1994:65; Burford 1993:186; De Vaux 1965:76; Kloppenborg 2006:292, 314, 317). According to Rollens (2014:156), 'seasonal workers and labourers (ἐργάται) were a special class of agricultural workers that came into being probably accompanying the consolidation of land into large estates during the Hellenistic period'. Some of these ex-smallholders continued to owe money even after losing their plots, forcing them to hire out their labour on large estates in order to not only make a living but also work off their debts (Garnsey 1980b:36, 42; Hanson & Oakman 1998:104; cf. Kloppenborg 2006:252). Discussing Herodian rule during the Roman Period, Stegemann and Stegemann (1999:110) wrote that 'the land was now tilled more and more by tenants, day laborers and slaves'. About four to five times more labour was required on most fields during harvest time and on large estates at least half of the labour force responsible for the harvest consisted of temporary workers who were otherwise non-resident (Shaw 2013:13, 18; cf. Hanson & Oakman 1998:104; Kloppenborg 2006:289). It should be obvious that the position of hired worker was far from enviable and much less secure than that of (tenant) smallholder (De Vaux 1965:76; Garnsey 1998:139; Hanson & Oakman 1998:98; Oakman 2008:224; see Aberbach 1994:166–168; cf. Job 7.1–2; 14.6; Stegemann & Stegemann 1999:71; White 1970:348). In fact, losing their land demoted them to the lowest socioeconomic level, namely that of 'the poor' (οἱ πτωχοί), which was a specific class of people in antiquity that included most notably those without land (cf. De Vaux 1965:75; Garnsey 1998:139; Häkkinen 2016:2, 4, 8; see Stegemann & Stegemann 1999:70–71, 79, 92–93, 133). According to Shim'on Appelbaum (1976:656–663), most of

the Palestinian population was landless in the first century CE. Together with slaves and *obaeratii*, the landless poor made up the segment of society from which agricultural labourers were sourced (Borowski 2002:25; cf. Garnsey 1980a:3–4, 1980b:38, 43; Bradley 1994:65; Burford 1993:183, 186, 189, 190; Kloppenborg 2006:252, 289, 292). Although non-servile agricultural workers were grouped with the poor, they were 'not placed in the same category as the beggars and other workless' (cf. Garnsey 1980b:38). Yet this boundary was flexible, with the same individuals often being a farmhand the one day and a beggar the next. Given the developments discussed thus far, it should come as no surprise that the 1st century CE saw a number of popular uprisings and revolts, during which the peasantry and poor not only demanded the cancellation of debts and the reallocation of land but also destroyed debt records (Josephus, *War* 2.427; 7.61; Boer & Petterson 2017:100; Brunt 1990:704, 708; Oakman 2008:13, 16, 21, 33; cf. Fisher 1998:199; Kloppenborg 2006:137).

Besides tenant farmers, wealthy landowners could also use farm managers to oversee the daily operations on their farms (Aubert 1994:122, 129, 199; Garnsey 1980b:40, 41, 1998:142; Harrill 2006:103; Kloppenborg 2006:279, 314; cf. Joshel 2010:174). The term '(estate/farm) manager' refers in this article to the person who managed a farming estate during the landowner's absence.⁷ The author prefers this title over English alternatives such as 'overseer', 'steward' or 'bailiff' (cf. Aubert 1994:118 n. 3). It was not uncommon for the managers of these estates to be slaves although they could also be freedmen or freeborn citizens (Boer & Petterson 2017:93, 96, 109; Harrill 2006:103, 231 n. 4; Hezser 2005:299; Joshel 2010:57; Roth 2018:99–100; see Aubert 1994:118 n. 3, 149–157; cf. Schottroff 2006:175; cf. Q 12. 42–46). Most commonly, the owners of manager-run farms lived some distance away in cities, but conscientious owners would visit their estates on occasion such as during harvest time (Harrill 2006:91–92, 109–110; cf. Aberbach 1994:118; Aubert 1994:122, 126; Burford 1993:173, 216–217, 219; Hezser 2005:149; Joshel 2010:175, 178; Kloppenborg 2006:279, 315, 368–369; MacMullen 1974:5; Oakman 2008:251–252; cf. Longus 4; Pliny, *Ep.* 9.20.2; Xenophon, *Oec.* 11.15–18; *P. Princ.* 2.72; *P. Lond.* 7.1948). A handful of these owners actually lived on the estate with the manager and staff (White 1970:404). The Zenon archive of Egyptian papyri shows that Apollonios managed his many holdings in Egypt and Palestine 'through a complex system of farms operated by stewards, slaves and tenancies, all supervised by managers' (Kloppenborg 2006:297).

Somewhere between the two extremes of landless or struggling villager and wealthy urbanite were opportunistic entrepreneurs and rural peasants who managed to keep their

7. The Roman 'estate manager' was known as a *vilicus* (Harrill 2006:103). The Greek 'estate manager' was known by several terms, including οἰκονόμος (as per Lk. 12.42), ἐπιμελετής/ἐπιμελητής, ἐπίτροπος, διοικητής, πραγματευτής and χειριστής. In the Hebrew Old Testament, the Jewish manager is often identified by use of the technical term 'over the house' (עַל-הַבַּיִת) (cf. 1 Ki 4.6; 16.9; 18.3; 2 Ki 18.18, 37; 19.2; Is 36.3, 22; 37.2). In later Jewish tradition, the phrase 'son of the house' (בְּנוֹת הַבַּיִת) and the loanword *oikonomos* (οἰκονομὸς) are preferred as designations for a manager. In Egyptian papyri, estate managers are mostly referenced as φροντισταί.

smallholdings and even prosper in the midst of changing economic circumstances (Garnsey 1980b:38; Stegemann & Stegemann 1999:133; cf. Aberbach 1994:160, 166, 241–242; Arnal 2001:132–133; Borowski 2002:26; De Vaux 1965:68, 73; Dever 2012:239; Silver 1983:75–76). Some of these well-to-do peasants would already have had the status and means to build on because of hereditary claims and leadership positions within the village (Boer & Petterson 2017:69). Literary sources, as well as comparative evidence from Egypt, among other places, indicate that privately owned, family-run pieces of land continued to exist alongside larger estates and lease holdings during the relevant period (Freyne 2000:98–99, 194; cf. Hawkins 2013:348). Industrial centres have been discovered dating from as early as the 8th and 7th centuries BCE, producing products such as pottery, textiles, olive oil, wine, iron and copper (Silver 1983:13; cf. Aberbach 1994:178; De Vaux 1965:77). Individual villages tended to specialise in a singular industry (De Vaux 1965:77; cf. Arnal 2001:150). Rural villages also demonstrated both population growth and an increase in agricultural activity during this time (cf. Oakman 2008:20; Reed 2000:84). Living spaces and households varied in size and influence (Arnal 2001:112; King & Stager 2001:192; cf. Borowski 2002:26; De Vaux 1965:73). Not all villagers were destitute, with some of them even owning considerable land and enjoying extravagant lifestyles (cf. Arnal 2001:132–133, 150; Aviam 2004:24; Boer & Petterson 2017:69; De Vaux 1965:68; King & Stager 2001:192). Concrete evidence of this comes, for example, from Yodefat, a rural Galilean village, where an upper-class mansion decorated with frescoes was discovered (Aviam 2004:24). Although the overwhelming majority of peasants lived in poverty, especially in Palestine during the 1st century (see Häkkinen 2016:1–9; Stegemann & Stegemann 1999:133–134; cf. Jacobs 2018:121–126; Ukpong 2012:200), there is little doubt that the peasantry was also made up of different socio-economic strata (Arnal 2001:112, 114–115, 150; Boer & Petterson 2017:68–72; cf. De Vaux 1965:68, 73; Häkkinen 2016:3; King & Stager 2001:192; Rollens 2014:12, 21, 36; Stegemann & Stegemann 1999:133). Some of these wealthier villagers owned larger estates themselves and hired some of their fellow villagers as wage workers and day-labourers (Arnal 2001:150–151; Boer & Petterson 2017:70, 72; cf. Burford 1993:188–189, 193–194; Garnsey 1998:144–145; Whittaker 1980:87; cf. Jr 22:13). In many cases, one may even speak of the exploitation of fellow villagers by these wealthy peasants (see Boer & Petterson 2017:68–72).

A Latin inscription found in Mactaris, Tunisia (North Africa), recounts in first-person narrative how a poor peasant with a smallholding hired himself out as a harvester and worked his way to becoming a wealthy and esteemed personality in his hometown (Shaw 2013:51, 89; see MacMullen 1974:42–43; cf. Garnsey 1998:144). His name has unfortunately been lost, but he has become known in scholarship as the 'Maktar Harvester' (Shaw 2013:51). According to Brent Shaw (2013:89), the technical language used by the Maktar Harvester suggests that his parents and himself were originally either homeless or lived in a very modest dwelling that did not really count as a proper house (cf. MacMullen

1974:43). Although this rags-to-riches story represents the exception, it does illustrate that upward mobility was not impossible, even for agricultural wage earners (Shaw 2013:90). In fact, there are similar examples from the Jewish world, like the tradition about Rab Huna, who started out as a farm worker and poor rabbinic student but ended up fulfilling the prophecy that he would one day be 'smothered in silk' (Aberbach 1994:45).⁸

The verisimilitude of Q 10.2

To summarise the previous section, the economic system of the day enabled rich and powerful landowners to exploit the peasantry by extracting produce from them and eventually appropriating their smallholdings through indebtedness and foreclosure (Ford 2016:21, 32; Häkkinen 2016:3; Ukpong 2012:200; see Boer & Petterson 2017:97–100; cf. Dever 2012:244; Drake 2014:237). The net result of all this was that the number of peasants who owned land decreased during the 1st century CE, while the number of dispossessed, landless farm workers increased, including especially tenant farmers and hired workers like day-labourers, adding to the non-servile workforce (Hanson & Oakman 1998:99; Stegemann & Stegemann 1999:28, 110, 112; Van Eck 2016:27; see Horsley 1995b:219–220; cf. De Vaux 1965:76; Oakman 2008:20–21, 224; cf. m. B. Meş. 7). There was an increasing shortage of land per capita, with arable land being gradually concentrated in the hands of the wealthy few (Aberbach 1994:42; Arnal 2001:149–150; Hanson & Oakman 1998:99; Stegemann & Stegemann 1999:112). As Oakman (2008:25) succinctly put it, 'more and more land came under the control of fewer and fewer landowners'. Based on the Parables of Enoch (1 Enoch 37–71), Van Eck (2016:27–29) found that the elite owned most of the cultivable land in Galilee during the decades before and after the turn of the millennium. Kloppenborg (2006:290) confirmed the same for Palestine as a whole, stating that 'the majority of the best lands were held by the elite'. Even those who managed to retain their land had to make do with smaller and less productive plots (Kloppenborg 2006:286, 290; Stegemann & Stegemann 1999:112). At the same time, the number of large estates in Palestine increased noticeably during the early Roman period. In general, it was a discernible trend in the 1st century CE that smallholdings were making way for larger estates, meaning that the harvests of individual peasants were decreasing and the number of dispossessed peasants and day-labourers was increasing. An increase in large estates and cash cropping translates into an increase in the use of and need for hired workers (Arnal 2001:149–150).

Addressing the early Roman situation specifically, White (1970:365) stated: 'References to food shortages are frequent (...) but there is no mention of any shortage of farm labour'. However, K.D. White (1970:366, 375) goes on to discuss evidence for the shortage of hired farm labour in the Roman context during the 1st centuries BCE and CE, respectively. In

⁸The story of King Saul, albeit from a much earlier period, might also be regarded in a similar vein, having started out as a moderate smallholder, but ultimately establishing the monarchy, amounting massive property and instituting royal agricultural estates (see Borowski 2002:26–27).

parallel with slave-run and other large estates, tenancy arrangements became increasingly popular in Italy from the 1st century BCE and in Palestine from the time of Roman occupancy (63 BCE), which might be a sign that there was a steady decrease in the availability of hired labour from these periods onward (White 1970:366, 372; cf. Aubert 1994:117–118; Brunt 1990:705; Hanson & Oakman 1998:99; Hezser 2005:122; Kloppenborg 2006:292). According to Jens Skydsgaard (1980:70), there were too many agricultural labourers in rural Italy during the 3rd – 2nd centuries BCE, when Cato the Elder wrote, and too few of them during the 1st century CE, when Pliny the Elder wrote (cf. Garnsey 1998:143–144; Shaw 2013:67).⁹ It is reasonable to assume that the same trend would have occurred in the Roman provinces during this period because roughly the same forces were at work, including especially the upsurge in large estates, tenancy arrangements and farms being supervised by managers (see Aubert 1994:117–119). In all likelihood, the increase in larger estates, tenant farming and entrepreneurial landowners happened at a faster rate than the increase in the labour force through dispossession of land (cf. Silver 1983:76). As would be typical for a movement towards an economy of scale, larger estates would lead to an increase in the overall harvest, which, in turn, would contribute to a shortage of labour. Although there were more hirelings available than before, there was, by comparison, substantially more physical harvests and harvesting work than before. Josephus tells us that 1st-century Galilee ‘is all cultivated by its inhabitants, and no part of it lies idle’ (*War* 3.43; translation from Whiston 1987:641; cf. Aberbach 1994:126 n 618b; Oakman 2008:20). G.A. Williamson and Mary Smallwood (ed.) (1981:206) translate the same statement by Josephus as follows: ‘every inch has been cultivated by the inhabitants and not a corner goes to waste’. Josephus is certainly exaggerating here because large parts of Galilee were not cultivable, but the general observation that Galilee was very fertile and intensely cultivated is beyond doubt (Arnal 2001:102; Oakman 2008:20).

Furthermore, considering the arduousness of harvesting work, especially reaping, and the shame of having to perform slave-like physical labour for a *de facto* master, it is reasonable to assume that the available labour force would not have jumped at the opportunity to do harvesting work on the large estates of despised landholders (cf. Rohrbaugh 1993:34). This would have been particularly true of ex-smallholders, who might have blamed recent developments such as the introduction of cities and large estates for losing their own smallholdings. Many of these ex-smallholders were now tenant farmers, meaning that their first obligation was towards their tenant farms. Although there were always non-servile peasants, they were typically involved in systems of dependency through indebtedness and tenancy, which limited their ability to function as free agents, even if they did on occasion hire out their services to other farms (Kloppenborg 2006:305, incl. n. 107; cf. Brunt 1990:705). At any rate, working as a hired labourer was not the only option available to

peasants who were kicked off their land. Other ‘options’ included banditry, beggary, prostitution, becoming petty artisans, joining religious movements, selling oneself or one’s children into slavery and so on (cf. Aubert 1994:194; Brunt 1990:715; Hezser 2005:99, 153, 300, 329; Oakman 2008:21; cf. Epictetus, *Diatr.* 4.1.34–37). Some of these ‘options’ were certainly more lucrative and less arduous than agricultural labour, especially reaping. If our overall assessment is correct, it would follow that the landowners, managers and tenants of 1st-century Palestine could not always bargain on the availability of enough non-servile labourers during harvest time. As Alison Burford (1993:193) rightly says: ‘Economic pressures on the free poor were not enough to guarantee without fail their regular attendance at harvesttime’.

The impact of urbanisation should also not be overlooked. The introduction of new cities such as Tiberias and Caesarea at the turn of the millennium had no small influence on surrounding villages, one of which was to draw agricultural and other workers away from the country and into the cities for construction work and other opportunities (Aberbach 1994:30; Hanson & Oakman 1998:73; cf. Aubert 1994:120, 125; Bradley 1994:65; Hawkins 2013:341). One can easily imagine dispossessed peasants moving to a nearby city to survive, especially if there were building projects going on, which was indeed the case in Sepphoris and Tiberias during the 1st century CE. Yet one should recognise that at least some freeborn urbanites would have left the city during harvest time to find temporary work in the countryside, thereby adding to the available workforce and partially compensating for the loss of manpower because of urbanisation (cf. Burford 1993:184; Hawkins 2013:341).¹⁰ However, the latter would have been significantly less common and impactful than the relocation of peasants to the city and would mostly have affected farms immediately surrounding these cities. Conversely, cities lived off the produce of surrounding villages and farms (Arnal 2001:147; Brunt 1990:702; Hanson & Oakman 1998:73; cf. Boer & Petterson 2017:84–85), from which it follows that the introduction of new cities was necessarily accompanied by the introduction of much greater harvests. In other words, urbanisation alone can account for both an increase in harvests throughout Galilee (and, to a lesser extent, Judea) and a decrease in available farmhands. There is also evidence of an increase in villages and towns, in addition to cities, all over Palestine during this period (Oakman 2008:20; cf. Josephus, *War* 3.42–43). This would have translated into an increase in both farms and labour, effectively cancelling each other out. At the same time, there is evidence of many from the landless class emigrating to the Transjordan to look for better opportunities (Oakman 2008:20–21, incl. n. 39). So not only were new cities drawing non-servile labourers away from the countryside, but desperation was also pushing them out of Palestine.

These observations would seem to confirm the generic claim of Q 10.2 that in Palestine the harvest was large and the

⁹On the Greek island of Chios, farmers hired campaigning Spartan soldiers as farmhands during the harvest, which illustrates a shortage of available wage earners during that period (see Burford 1993:191–192).

¹⁰This is in addition to those urbanites who owned and worked smallholdings in the *chōra* (cf. Burford 1993:184).

workers few, comparatively speaking. Hence, the opening statement of Q 10.2 seems to pass the verisimilitude test. When Richard Valantasis (2005:95) claimed that the opening statement of Q 10.2 is not intended literally, because 'a great harvest provides sufficient resources for the farmer to hire harvesters to bring in the crop', he missed the point that harvesters might not have been readily available (cf. Roth 2018:282). Garland (2011:425) drew on the parable of the labourers in the vineyard in Matthew 20.1–16 to argue that there were abundant labourers for the harvest during the time of Jesus. In this story, a landowner goes to the marketplace on five separate occasions in one day to hire day-labourers, finding them on each occasion standing idly waiting to be hired. This parable alone is meagre evidence for such a general claim about all of ancient Palestine. As a parable, the account is inherently fictional, meaning that one cannot automatically assume that every aspect is true-to-life. Moreover, the parable occurs only in Matthew, casting doubt on its authenticity. If Matthew invented the parable *ex nihilo*, it would reflect the temporal and geographical context of the First Evangelist, not that of the Sayings Gospel Q or the historical Jesus. The agricultural circumstances in Syria towards the end of the 1st century cannot be assumed to be the same as those in Galilee (or Palestine) during the first few decades of the 1st century. More importantly, there is no mention of a harvest in the parable. It is more likely that the parable takes place during a different period, not during the grape harvest. The latter is even more likely when considering, firstly, that the owners, tenants and managers of vineyards consistently hired day-labourers for recurring tasks such as weeding, hoeing, clearing brushwood, pruning and burning weeds and secondly, that vineyards typically took two to three years to even produce its first usable harvest and five years to reach full productive capacity (Kloppenborg 2006:281, 288; cf. Joshel 2010:172; MacMullen 1974:42).

This study's finding that Q 10.2 is true-to-life is supported by the saying's own argumentative logic. Rhetorically, the instruction to ask the 'master of the harvest' to send more workers into the harvest is buttressed by the opening statement that the harvest is plentiful and the workers few (cf. Hartin 2015:61). The inferential conjunction οὐν ['so'] turns the second leg of the logion into an inferential instruction, meaning that the rhetorical function of the opening comment is to buttress the subsequent instruction (cf. Roth 2018:282 n. 279). In short, the opening comment provides the motivation for the subsequent instruction (Hartin 2015:61). The logical presentation of the argument is reversed for rhetorical effect. Instead of featuring the instruction first and the supporting statement second, Q 10.2 features the supporting statement first and the instruction second. This improves the rhetorical effect in two principal ways: (1) it enables the argument to proceed from the general to the specific and (2) it portrays the instruction as being necessitated by observed reality. It follows that for the opening statement to be effective in its rhetorical function of buttressing the subsequent instruction, it would have to be accepted as true by the audience. In other words, the verisimilitude of the opening statement is necessitated by

the argumentative logic of the logion. Jesus did sometimes make outlandish claims, but he would typically use arguments to support such claims, as opposed to using an outlandish claim as a supportive argument to buttress something else. Moreover, Q's Jesus usually introduces his outlandish and implausible claims with the formula 'I tell you' (λέγω ὑμῖν), which is not the case here (cf. Kloppenborg 2000:79 n. 15).¹¹ Hence, there are enough clues in the logion itself to indicate that it expected the first audiences to agree with the opening assessment that the harvest is large and the workers few. This probably applies both to the general backdrop of 1st-century Palestinian farming and to the particular setting of a large agricultural estate.

Findings

Focusing exclusively on the literal side to the logion in Q 10.2, the present study attempted to determine the verisimilitude of the opening statement that the harvest is plentiful but the workers few. After finding from evidence in the logion itself that the saying most likely deals with a hypothetical farm (not an actual farm) as representative of Palestinian agriculture more generally, the study reconstructed the logion's agricultural context in 1st-century Palestine. Given the developments in 1st-century Palestine described in the article, the reference to a large harvest would have been mainly, if not exclusively, applicable to large estates, as opposed to smallholdings. As the audience of this logion was the general followers of Jesus, including especially the peasantry and poor, the reference to a large harvest would have reminded them of the unfair and oppressing sociopolitical developments that made their daily survival increasingly desperate.

It was concluded that the logion's opening statement passes the verisimilitude test. The first hearers would in all likelihood have nodded their heads in agreement at the general observation that the harvest is plentiful but the workers few. This applies to both large estates and the situation in 1st-century Palestine more generally. The increasing harvests were the result of more and more large estates being introduced into the region, the large-scale expropriating of smallholdings from peasants through indebtedness, the success of some entrepreneurial peasants, the effective implementation of tenancy and farm management arrangements by rich landowners and the introduction of cities. The reasons for the workforce being insufficient were the urbanisation and emigration of many peasants, the other 'options' available to peasants and the poor besides harvesting work, the unattractiveness of freelance harvesting work as an option to dispossessed peasants, and the high rate at which large estates were being introduced, which outperformed the rate at which non-servile harvesters were becoming available through the expropriation of smallholdings. The finding that the logion passes the verisimilitude test is confirmed by the logion's own argumentative logic, which relies on the opening claim being true-to-life in order to be rhetorically effective.

¹¹Cf. Q 7.26, 28; 10.12, 24; 11.9, 51; 12.22, 27, 44, 59; 13.35; 15.7, (10); 17.34.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

Author's contributions

L.H. is the sole author of this article.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

National Research Foundation: Incentive Funding for Rated Researchers Programme. Grant No: 115247.

Data availability

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

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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