HEBREW WORD STUDY – THE CAMEL AND THE NEEDLE’S EYE

Mark 10:25, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God.”

This passage has proved to be very troubling to those seeking some interpretation. It is obviously impossible for a camel to go through the eye of a needle therefore it must be concluded that it is impossible for a rich man to enter into heaven. It would then follow that only poor people can get into heaven. Then the question arises as to what point do you cross the line between rich and poor. How much wealth do you need before you are considered rich and when do you cross that line to the point where you are considered rich.

You may sit back feeling comfortable that you are not rich therefore you have nothing to worry about, but in the eyes of someone from a third world nation you would be considered rich and therefore it is impossible for you to enter heaven. Now this verse becomes very troubling. So this is one verse that we completely ignore as everyone wants to go to heaven but we don’t want to be poor to do it.
But this is, after all, the inspired Word of God and all Scripture is given to us by God for a purpose, so we just cannot turn our heads the other way and go about our business. At least I cannot turn a blind eye to this passage, I need some closure on it.

People who have traveled to Israel often come back with photos of a gate in Jerusalem which their tour guide, looking to wow their shekel paying customers, explains is the gate known as the Eye of the Needle. This is a very low and small gate which was kept open after the main gate closed for the night and a camel could only pass through this smaller gate if it were to have its baggage removed and got down on its knees and crawled through. However, your wily tour guide will not mention that this gate was constructed in the 16th century and did to exist during the time of Christ. There are other variations to this which include ancient inns having small entrances to mountain passes that has such small entrances that the merchants had to dismount their camels to pass through.

These explanations sound plausible and take away the impossibility of a rich man going to heaven only he still has to divest himself of his riches to get to heaven. On top of that there are absolutely no historical evidence of any of these. Besides in verse 27 Jesus declares that it is impossible to pass through without God, not without your riches.

Most our commentaries will point out that such an expression is common in all Eastern cultures but it is usually expressed as an elephant going through the eye of a needle and that
expression is a hyperbole to show that something is impossible. As far as using a camel to express this, it is believed that people in Judea would be more familiar with a camel. However, if they were not familiar with elephants they would not be familiar with this idiom to begin with. This idiom would have been familiar to the Jews as that very expression is found in the Talmud and hence would have been in oral Tradition. In Berakhot 55b of the Talmud there is this expression, “They do not show a man a palm tree of gold, nor an elephant going through the eye of a needle.” However, if Jesus was using such a familiar expression why change it to a camel and you are still expressing an impossibility and saying it is impossible for a rich man to get into heaven albeit with the help of God.

The Midrash in making a commentary on the Song of Solomon does allude to this idiom in the expression, “The Holy One says, open for me a door as big as a needle’s eye and I will open for you a door through which may enter tents and camels, although it is questionable that the Aramaic word used here really means camel.

Ah, therein lies the root of the problem. The Greek word used for camel is kameolon which means just that, camel, nothing else. Yet, Jesus did not speak this in Greek but in Aramaic. The Aramaic word for camel is gamla which has a double meaning, both rope and camel. The course hair of the camel was often used to fashion a rope by binding these hairs together, hence the word gamla took on this double meaning.

Needles in ancient times were not these little metal pin type needles like we purchase at Walmart today, these needles were large and made of oak and you could thread a cord through it.
They were often threaded with a cord and hung over the necks of the camels. When the cord was passed through the eye of the needle some of its fibers would come off. Hence a rich man must, learn to share some of his luxuries.

I have also read in Aramaic literature an idiomatic expression which seems to have been in commonly use during Jesus’s day. When an individual forms an easy and quick friendship he will say that when they met it was like a needle and *thread,* but if that relationship did not have an easy start and they had difficulty understanding each other they would say that their relationship was like a *rope* passing through a needle. My feeling is that this is the idiom that Jesus is making a reference to.

The kingdom of God to the disciples understanding was not heaven but represented a knowledge of God and an understanding of God. Thus, a rich man to understand God is like a rope passing through a needle, their relationship with God would encounter some difficulty and without God’s help it would not be possible. The word for rich in Aramaic is *atira* which means one who has an abundance of resources, not necessarily money but options to pull one through a difficult situation.

Jesus could have been alluding to a commonly understood expression from Oral Tradition later the Talmud where it states that a poor man can easily know God better than a rich man or an *atira* because a poor man must daily depend upon God for his bread where a rich man can acquire his bread through his abundance.
Jesus is simply stating a truth that is common to us all. When we run out of options and resources it is much easier to depend upon God to seek and enter a knowledge of God (kingdom of God) than it is when we have plenty of resources and options at our disposal.

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