

**AGAIN — CAMEL OR ROPE
IN MATTHEW 19.24 AND MARK 10.25?**

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The discussion concerning the alternate use of κάμιλος “rope” for κάμηλος “camel” in Matt 19.24 has normally been discussed in Western scholarship from the standpoint of a grammatical distinction based on the pronunciation of Greek vowels in late Antiquity. But Alan Bain notes:

The situation re the Peshitta text (which I do have) lies in the Aramaic word . . . The Aramaic is *gmla*, which can mean rope or camel according to the context—rather like Aramaic targums. Aramaic, like primitive Hebrew, has no vowel points, so that “received” interpretations are the norm. The Aramaic speaking and Aramaic using churches have “received” rope for this verse, and deny any knowledge or reason for reading it otherwise.¹

This makes the question of Jesus’ words a matter of a translation problem from the Semitic languages in which Jesus would have taught, rather than a discussion of how the Greek was pronounced. This has been missed in Western, Greek reading scholarship. Thus, Francis Wright Beare writes in his commentary on Matthew:

Jesus uses another of his tremendous hyperboles. “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” A few manuscripts and some versions read κάμιλος, ‘rope, cable, hawser,’ in place of κάμηλος, ‘camel’ It is, however, dismissed by the grammarians as a ‘Byzantine invention’, belonging to ‘the museum of exegetical curiosities’ (Moulton-Howard, Vol.II, p.72; cf. Blass- Debrunner, §24 - ‘rationalisierde Künstelei’; they can find no trace of it in Greek usage before Suidas [tenth cent.])²

2 Again—Camel or Rope in Matthew 19.24?

Looking at this word also from a grammatical point of view is an older, more popular commentary by William Barclay, who writes:

There is another, and a very attractive, suggestion. The Greek word for camel is *kamēlos*; the Greek word for a ship's hawser is *kamīlos*. Now it was characteristic of later Greek that the vowel sounds tended to lose their sharp distinctions and to approximate one another. In such Greek there would be hardly any discernible difference between the sound of *i* and *e*; they would both be pronounced as *ee* is in English.³

This is also the case in Bruce Metzger's more critical comments on Luke 18.25, a parallel passage, where he suggests the reading of *κάμηλον* in "later witnesses" was "an attempt to soften the rigor of the statement," which was "facilitated by the circumstance that the *ι* and *η* came to be pronounced alike in later Greek (both words were pronounced *kah meelon*).⁴ There is a rabbinical text that uses a similar idiom about an elephant going through the eye of a needle (Ber., 55b; BM, 38b), which would suggest that perhaps the saying was a folk image.⁵ But the thrust of Western scholarship has been to see the suggestion of "hawser" as a mistake based on a mispronunciation centuries after the Greek Testament was written.

However, Alan Bain's point is based on an early, Eastern Semitic text, not on a Greek grammatical point. Reading "cable" instead of "camel" is also the case in the Old Armenian version, where the word in question is translated *mahl*, which is read "cable" or "hawser."⁶ Finally, George Howard published a complete Hebrew text of Matthew in a fourteenth century Jewish work, which appears to be independent of the Greek text. The text reads *הגמל*.⁷ Often

גמל in Semitic languages can be translated as “camel.” In fact there is no attestation otherwise for early Hebrew. But the equation of גמל with “camel” is far from a given for the other Semitic languages cognate to Hebrew, where גמל serves as a word for both “camel” and “hawser,” and it may well be that it is only our paucity of ancient Hebrew texts that restricts the meaning to “camel.”

Thus, the confusion may well lie in the original Semitic word underlying the Greek translation, not simply a confusion in the pronunciation of ι and η in later Greek. The Greek grammar of Blass-Debrunner-Funk places the discussion of this passage in §24, where they cite two exceptions to their conclusion that the change from “camel” to “hawser” is “a later artificial rationalization”⁸ The exceptions noted are a reference to a citation by Viggo Bröndal, who came to the conclusion that “cable” was correct on the basis of developments in Arabic grammar.⁹ The second is by Émile Boisacq, editor of an etymological Greek lexicon, who points out that κάμηλος refers to “arab. جمل (*gummal*) ‘gros câble de navire’. Lewy *Fremdw.* 154).” He then quotes the reference in a footnote:

“Il n’y a pas lieu de croire que le mot doit son origine au passage connu du N.T. Matth. XIX 24: κάμηλον διὰ τρυπήματος ραφίδος . . . , où certains ont proposé le sens ‘câble’ comme mieux approprié; . . .”¹⁰

In both the exceptions listed in Blass-Debrunner-Funk, the suppositions in favor of “cable” are based not on a change in Greek pronunciation, but on the underlying Semitic original that stands behind the Greek Testament. One wonders why this distinction was missed by the grammarians.

4 Again—Camel or Rope in Matthew 19.24?

The Aramaic text known as the Peshitta is the “name given to an ancient and authoritative text to distinguish it from other Bible revisions and translations which were introduced into some of the Churches of the East (Monophysites) after the division at Ephesus and Chalcedon. . . . This is because the text was in use for 400 years before the Christian Church was divided into several sects.”¹¹ It is clearly old enough to have access to an original Semitic tradition. The word used in the Peshitta of Matt 19.24 is ܠܘܟܘܢܐ (*gml*^o). The word means either “rope” or “camel.” R. Payne Smith cited “camel” as well as “*funis navalis*,” i.e., a ship’s cable for ܠܘܟܘܢܐ.¹² He referred to the Arabic cognates جمل (*gamal*) “camel” and جملة (*gummal*) “[A cable;] the rope of a ship, . . . the thick rope thereof, . . . consisting of [a number of] ropes put together, . . . the ropes of ships, put together so as to be like the waists of men [in thickness].”¹³ Lane makes reference to the *Qur’an*, *Sura* 7.38, “Until the cable (الجملة [*gummal*]) shall enter into the eye of the needle”¹⁴ Palmer, following later Islamic tradition, renders this passage “for these the doors of heaven shall not be opened, and they shall not enter into Paradise until a camel الجملة (*gamal*) shall pass into a needle’s eye.”¹⁵ In a private conversation, Khalid Blankenship, professor of Islam at Temple University (Philadelphia), affirmed that the pointed text says “camel,” but that the unpointed text is unclear, suggesting that the verb seems to fit “hawser” better than “camel.”¹⁶ So it is clear that the Semitic original underlying the passage in the *Qur’an* could lend itself equally to either interpretation, although here as well, the official interpretation favors “camel.”

Thus, those who come from the Semitic speaking Eastern Church presume the word in Matt 19.24 means a ship’s

hawser. Western scholars, who work only in the Greek text, make pejorative statements about the possibility that Jesus used the word גַּמְלָה (= جمل [gummal] = κάμιλος = “rope, cable”) and refer simply to a change in the way Greek vowels were pronounced around the tenth century—as if Jesus taught in Greek and not in Hebrew and Aramaic, his native language and the language of Torah.

Finally, there is the logic of the passage itself. Although Matthew has placed this saying on the journey from Galilee to Jerusalem, the real context is that Jesus is speaking to disciples whose culture had been fishing, whose nets had been mended by sewing, men who fished in little boats on a small lake. The image of the oceangoing vessel with a heavy, braided rope hawser holding to the anchor or tying the ship to the pier makes the image much stronger and is not at all a way of making it less impossible or less hyperbolic. As they used their hand-held needles and thread to mend nets, Jesus said: “It is easier for a hawser to pass through the eye of a needle, than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven.” The logic is inescapable, and the language moves in that direction, as soon as one looks to the Semitic tradition behind the Greek text, working in the languages which Jesus fluently read and spoke.

NOTES

1. From the internet list Ecchst-1 (a discussion list on Christian church history), February 28, 1995.
2. Francis Wright Beare, *The Gospel according to Matthew*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1981: 396–397.

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3. William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew: Volume 2 (Chapters 11 to 28)* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1958) 239.
4. Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (London: United Bible Societies, 1971) 169.
5. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Volume III, Edited by Gerhard Kittel (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1965) 593.
6. Bromiley, op. cit., 594 n. 6. Albert J. Edmond, *The Gospel According to Mark in Ancient Armenian: From the Oldest Manuscripts, without the Fifth-Century Appendix* (Ardmore, PA: Ideal Press, 1926) 32.
7. George Howard, *The Gospel of Matthew according to a Primitive Hebrew Text* (Mason, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1987) 95.
8. Robert Funk, A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature: F. Blass and A. Debrunner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961) 14.
9. F. Poland, ed., *Berliner philologische Wochenschrift (38. Jahrgang, No. 46, November 16, 1918)* 1061–1062.
10. Émile Boisacq, *Dictionnaire Étymologique de la Zangue Greque* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter's Universitätsbuchgandlung, 1916) 402–403.
11. George M. Lamsa, *The Holy Bible from Ancient Eastern Manuscripts* (Philadelphia: A. J. Holman, 1957) vii–viii.
12. R. Payne Smith, *Thesaurus Syriacus*. Tomus 1(Oxonii: E Typographeo Clarendiano, 1879) 736.

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13. Edward William Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon* (Eight volumes; 1863–1893) (Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1968 reprint) II: 461. (Click on this line to view page 461 in Lane's Lexicon.)
14. Lane, *ibid.*, 461. Click here to view Sura 7:38 in Khan's translation and click here for Bell's translation.
15. E. H. Palmer, translator, *Koran (Qur'an)* (London: Oxford, 1953) 127.
16. Oral communication, March, 1995.

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