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Revisiting the “Camel and the Needle” A Philological Recontextualization of Phoenician Letter Nomenclature

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Revisiting the “Camel and the Needle”

A Philological Recontextualization of Phoenician Letter Nomenclature

Max Pollard*

Abstract

This article reconsiders a canonical New Testament metaphor in which Jesus declares that transforming a rich man into a man of God is as simple as passing a camel through the eye of a needle (see [1], [2], [3]). Traditional translations have rendered this expression as hyperbolic or allegorical imagery; (cf. [6], [7]) however, a closer philological analysis - drawing on studies of ancient scripts indicates that the metaphor directly refers to the names of ancient Phoenician letters. The altered rendering found in the Peshitta - where the imagery is substituted with a more “logical” metaphor lacking any letter reference (cf. [15]) - serves as evidence that the original allusion was grounded in the Phoenician alphabet. Given the shared heritage of Old Phoenician and Old Hebrew (cf. [8], [9]), and considering Jesus’s deep engagement with Jewish history and ancient texts (cf. [4], [5]), this interpretation gains further plausibility. Notably, the divine name YHWH appears inscribed in Phoenician letters on certain Dead Sea Scroll fragments which are otherwise written in other scripts (see [11], [13]), highlighting the retention of early Phoenician orthography in later textual traditions.

Context

The study of biblical language often reveals layers of meaning that modern translations have obscured. One striking example is the metaphor wherein Jesus compares the conversion of a rich man to the process of passing a camel through the eye of a needle ([1], [2], [3]). This article argues that such metaphors were not merely fanciful images but were deliberate references to the nomenclature of ancient Phoenician letters - a system well known in the educated Jewish milieu of the time (cf. [6], [7]). Jesus, whose education included not only religious scriptures but also ancient linguistics

traditions (cf. [4], [5]), would have been familiar with both the symbolic and phonetic roles of these letters. This paper posits that the “camel” and the “eye of the needle” were not metaphorical devices, but technical allusions to specific letter names and shapes in the Phoenician script, that of the Phoenician letter “Camel” and “Eye of the Needle.” This interpretation does not render the original Koine Greek text intelligible, rather, it changes the passage from an arbitrary reference to an object being passed through another arbitrary smaller item, into a literary metaphor that would have been well understood by those who studied scripture at the time. This interpretation is not just implied by the familiarity of those of the time period and subject matter

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with the letter names which are mentioned, but also by the form of each glyph, with the letter "Camel" being able to be easily turned into an "Eye of a Needle" with an additional stroke of a scribal implement. In similar narratives in the New Testament, Jesus refers to individual letters from more modern (to the events asserted in the New Testament) alphabets, such as a reference to a "Jot" or "Tittle" from the Hebrew alphabet. Letters from different scripts are mentioned, such as "Alpha" and "Omega." In every other letter references throughout the New Testament, two letters are referred to.

The Linguistic Nuances

In its original context, the passage exploits the inherent characteristics of the Phoenician alphabet. Each letter in this ancient script was not only a symbol but also carried a designated name often derived from earlier hieroglyphic representations ([7], [9]). The terms rendered in the New Testament for "camel" and "eye of the needle" are best understood as direct allusions to these letter names (cf. [6]). When viewed through the lens of ancient orthographic traditions, the metaphor suggests that a small alteration in a letter's form - analogous to transforming one letter into another - can yield a significant change in meaning. Such a reading aligns with broader discussions on biblical metaphors and allegorical language (cf. [16]), offering a fresh perspective on the apparent absurdity of the image when taken solely at face value.

The Peshitta Revision as Evidence of an Original Letter Reference

The revision found in the Peshitta offers compelling evidence for the presence of an original allusion to Phoenician letter names. In an effort to present a more "logical" and readily comprehensible metaphor, the translators replaced the nuanced reference with imagery that eschews any direct connection to the ancient alphabet (cf. [15]). This modification implies that the earlier version, familiar to audiences versed in the subtleties of ancient scripts, carried an intended double entendre - one that was later lost in more literal translations (cf. [4], [5]). Such textual variations are part of a broader pattern of early Christian scriptural revision, as documented in studies of canonical transmission ([4], [5]).

The Interrelation of Phoenician and Hebrew Traditions

The connection between Old Phoenician and Old Hebrew is well established, with both scripts sharing a common ancestry and a suite of linguistic features (cf. [8], [10]). The differences between the two scripts are primarily geographic in nature rather than stemming from any modifications in their form. The evolution of the alphabet from pictographic symbols to a linear script is well chronicled (cf. [7], [9]), and modern resources ([10]) help illustrate these relationships. Jesus, as a scholar deeply immersed in Jewish history and ancient texts, would have been intimately familiar with these traditions. His educational background, which likely included studies

of both canonical scriptures and ancient linguistic systems, supports the interpretation that his metaphors intentionally invoke the letter names of the ancient alphabet. Moreover, the discovery of the divine name YHWH in Phoenician letters on Dead Sea Scroll fragments ([11], [12], [13]) underscores how sacred names and terms were intricately linked to Phoenician orthography. This evidence further bolsters the argument that early biblical writers employed such allusions within a richly layered literary and theological framework (cf. [14]).

Conclusion

A reassessment of the "camel and the needle" metaphor reveals that its original meaning likely rested on a sophisticated interplay between language and script. By directly referring to the names of ancient Phoenician letters, the metaphor encapsulated a transformative process - a minor modification in a letter's form leading to profound semantic change. The subsequent alteration in the Peshitta, which eliminates the letter reference in favor of a more straightforward image, underscores the significance of the original allusion (cf. [15]). Coupled with the intertwined heritage of Phoenician and Hebrew ([8], [10]) and the attestation of divine names in Phoenician form on ancient manuscripts ([11], [12], [13]), this analysis invites a broader reconsideration of biblical metaphors and the linguistic milieu of early Christian texts (cf. [16]).

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