

BRIEF NOTES ON PASSAGES OF THE GOSPELS.

II. THE CAMEL AND THE NEEDLE'S EYE.

(*Matt.* xix. 24; *Mark* x. 25; *Luke* xviii. 25.)

ON the general narrative of the Young Ruler who came to Jesus with a question, somewhat patronising in its form¹ and wholly objectionable in spirit, I have nothing to add to what I have already written.² I have accounted for the young man's breathless hurry³ by his desire to catch Jesus before He left the Peræan for the cis-Jordanic Bethany, and have endeavoured to shew the erroneous tendency betrayed by his question, the Divine wisdom and tender irony of the spirit in which our Lord answered it, and the reason why He applied a crucial test to one whose very appeal—if it came from the heart—implied his desire to rise to something more high and heroical in religion than a merely conventional goodness. How much the Young Ruler had over-rated his own desire for things spiritual,—how he failed to give up the near sweetness of his temporal possessions for the perfect sacrifice which would prove his fitness for that eternal life which he desired,—how, in fact, with over-clouded brow and sorrowing heart,⁴ he made “the great refusal,” is one of the most touching narratives of the Gospel history.

¹ “Good teacher” (*Luke* xviii. 18). No Rabbi was ever thus addressed, and the epithet sounds very like a patronising qualification of the title; which may be part of the reason why Jesus rejects it.

² “Life of Christ,” vol. ii. pp. 159–163.

³ “Running up and falling at his knees.” A picturesque touch, preserved as usual by *St. Mark* (*Chap.* x. 17).

⁴ *Mark* x. 22, *στυγνάσας*; *Luke* xviii. 23, *πειδλυπος*.

Jesus looked round Him¹ to see whether the sad incident had brought its own lesson, and, perhaps because it had failed to do so, He said to his disciples, "How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God." The words filled them with amazement. Peasants by birth and in rank, accustomed from childhood to that sad, uncomplaining, unquestioning submissiveness which, to this day, characterizes the Fellahin of Palestine more entirely than any of the patient Orientals of down-trod classes,—familiar, too, with the spectacle of enormous wealth accumulated in the hands of those to whom they looked up with awful reverence, the words came to them like some strange revelation.

Those wealthy Sadducean priests, whom, at high tides and festivals, they saw officiating in almost royal state amid the gorgeous ceremonials of the Day of Atonement—those Rabbis and Pharisees, who moved at their ease even among Roman officials, and claimed, in right of their wisdom, an equality with kings²—those friends of Menahem, who had once been Essenes, but now walked in golden garments in Herod's palaces³—would it be *hard* for all these to enter into the kingdom of heaven? Would it be hard for "the Master Nicodemus⁴—hard for the honourable Sanhedrist of Ramath?

¹ Mark x. 23, περιβλεψάμενος.

² See the anecdote of King Jannæus, the Persian Satrap, and Simeon Ben Shetach, "Life of Christ," vol. ii. p. 123.

³ Matt. xi. 3; Jost. i. 259.

⁴ John iii. 10, ὁ διδάσκαλος, perhaps the *chakam*, or third officer, of the Sanhedrim.

Even so! "Children," said Jesus, "how hard it is to enter into the kingdom of God!"¹

Had this answer been—as it appears in our Version—"How hard is it for them *that trust in riches* to enter into the kingdom of God," there would not have been the same ground for the intense and overwhelming astonishment of the disciples.² As a gloss, indeed, the explanatory words are perfectly true, and shew an insight into the fact that the danger lies not in the *possession* of riches, but in the *being possessed by* them. But it was not our Lord's method thus to water down the force of his own utterances. It was his will, during the short years of his stay on earth, to impress for ever upon the souls of men the great truths and principles to which He gave expression. Some of these truths had long been in the possession of mankind,³ had even found a timid and hesitating

¹ This is the reading of B. Δ. K. and the Coptic Version, and even if it were not supported by the immense authority of S, yet to any one familiar with the method of Christ's answers, it would possess high internal evidence of probability. (I may mention that, in my "Life of Christ," by a mere clerical error, D was read for Δ, and this single accidental slip, in volumes of 1000 pages, involving *many* thousands of allusions and references, was quoted in one leading review in proof that I was not at home in my subject. Such is the competency, the candour, and the generosity of anonymous criticism.)

² Matt. xix. 25, ἐξεπλήσσαντο σφόδρα.

³ Celsus makes it a charge against our Lord that He had borrowed the sentiment about the danger of riches from Plato! This is not the place to prove once more the total misapprehension on which such a charge rests. Perhaps, however, the reader may be interested to see how Plato thought on the subject, and how deeply even a Greek could feel the danger of riches. "It is impossible," he says, "to be exceptionally rich and exceptionally good. . . . The very rich are not good." Plato, "De Legg," v. 743.—"It is difficult for a rich man to be sober-minded," is an axiom found in Stobæus, Anthol., vol. i. p. 146. See "Christliche Klänge," p. 86.

expression on the lips of some of the greatest Rabbis. But a truth may lie in the lumber-room of the memory side by side with the most exploded errors, and the mere knowledge or enunciation of it is wholly useless to mankind unless it be clothed in such a form as may enforce conviction and insure accordant practice. And this was why—following his chosen way of calling attention to the awful depth of his meaning by the startling paradox of the form in which that meaning was clothed—Jesus added, “It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of the needle than for a rich man to pass into the kingdom of God.”¹

Undoubtedly it was a very startling utterance. The acceptance of the modification, “*those that trust in riches,*” is a sign of the very early date at which an effort was made to soften the meaning;² but even if that be accepted as the genuine text in St. Mark’s Gospel only, the total absence of so remarkable a hint, by way of explanation, in the other Synoptists would seem to shew that it does not represent the *exact words* spoken by our Lord. And, again, even if Jesus did use that expression, the proverb which He here quotes, and which is preserved in all three Evangelists alike, would still be left in all its sternness.

1. It is well known that an early attempt was made to mitigate the proverb either by reading *κάμιλον*, “a rope,” or by explaining *κάμηλον* in the same sense. As to the first attempt, there is not

¹ Mark x. 25, *διελθεῖν, εἰσελθεῖν*.

² Schleiermacher calls it “a limitation by a later hand.”

only—in spite of Itacism¹—no tittle of diplomatic evidence in favour of *κάμιλος*, but it is even very doubtful whether any such word exists at all. The fact that it does not once occur in the whole of the LXX., or elsewhere in the New Testament, would alone be almost fatal to its existence, at any rate, as a Hellenistic form; but, further than this, it is not once found in the whole range of classical literature, and is only vouched for by Suidas and a scholiast on the “Wasps of Aristophanes.”² Origen, however, and Theophylact inform us that while they retained the form *κάμιλον*, there were some who understood the word to mean “a ship’s rope.” This meaning is given to it in Phavorinus, but since it is a meaning otherwise unknown, both to classical and to Hellenistic Greek, it may fairly be dismissed as a mere chimera, which had its origin from difficulties connected with this very passage. The obviously intentional parallel between *passing through* the needle’s eye, and *passing into* the kingdom of God, which I have already indicated, would alone be sufficient to condemn it as a baseless conjecture.³

2. Are we, then, to take the expression quite literally as a proverb, or can we accept the inter-

¹ Itacism is the constant confusion of vowels in the MSS., due to the obliteration of all distinctness in the vowel sounds at the era to which the present MSS. of the New Testament belongs.

² Suidas, *s.v.* *κάμηλος*. Scholiast, art. *Vesp.*, 1030.

³ Whatever more can be said for it may be found in Bochart’s “*Hieroicoicon*,” i. 92. He is misled in supposing that *κάμηλος* ever did or could mean “rope,” and therefore I attach no importance to his assertion that the word *גמל* ever could or did bear this meaning. It is fair to add that he quotes from Buxtorf a Talmudic proverb, which says, “The passage of the soul from the body is as difficult as that of a rope through a narrow passage.” See Talmud, *s.v.* *בטורין*.

pretation that "the eye of the needle" was a familiar expression for the side gate of a city?

So far as I am aware—but on this point I may easily be mistaken—the first traveller who called attention to the fact that the small side gate sometimes found in Eastern cities was called "the needle's eye" was Sir J. Chardin, in his "Travels in Persia." The same fact has been attested by others, as, for instance, by the late Lord Nugent, in his "Lands Classical and Sacred." "Entering Hebron," he says, "we were proceeding through a double gateway such as is seen in so many of the old Eastern cities—even in some of the modern—one wide-arched road, and another narrow one by the side, through the latter of which persons on foot generally pass, to avoid the chance of being jostled or crushed by the beasts of burden coming through the main gateway. We met a caravan of loaded camels thronging this passage. The drivers cried out to my two companions and myself, desiring us to betake ourselves for safety to the gate with the smaller arch, calling it *Es summ el kayât* (the hole, or eye, of the needle). If, as on inquiry I am inclined to believe, this name is applied, not to this gate in Hebron only, but generally in cities where there is a footway entrance by the side of the larger one, it may, perhaps, give an easy and simple solution of what in the text (Mark x. 25) has appeared to some to be a strained metaphor; whereas that of the entrance gate, low and narrow, through which the sumpter-camel cannot be made to pass unless with great difficulty, and stripped of all the incumbrances of his load, his trappings, and his merchan-

dise, may seem to illustrate more clearly the foregoing verse: 'How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God.'

The kindness of one of the many correspondents who, though personally strangers, have written to tell me of points connected with the life of Christ, enables me to add a new illustration to this interesting fact.

"In the summer of 1835," says a gentleman whose name I cannot mention without his permission, "when travelling in the northern part of Africa (Morocco), I took up my abode for a time in the house of a Jew named Bendelak. The house was built quadrangular, having an open court, in which beautiful plants were flourishing, and where the family sat in the heat of the day beneath a large awning. High double gates faced the street, not unlike our coach-house doors, in one of which was a smaller door, which served as an entrance to the court. Being seated one day in a balcony of the upper chamber, *I suddenly heard the exclamation, 'Shut the needle's eye.' 'Shut the eye.' Looking down I saw a stray camel trying to push through the little open doorway.* Shortly afterwards I questioned the master of the house (a man whom I can never recall to mind without feelings of the utmost respect), and learnt from him that the double doors were always called 'the needle,' and the little door 'the needle's eye,' which explanation of course reminded me forcibly of the well-known passage in St. Matthew. Bendelak assured me that no camel would push through 'the eye' unless driven by stick or hunger, and always *without any back load.*

If the allusion of Christ be to this, it forcibly teaches the lesson that a rich man must strive and humble himself—must be willing to leave behind the load of his riches—must hunger for the bread of heaven—or he can never pass through the narrow way that leadeth unto life eternal.”

No one will deny that the sense thus yielded is very beautiful, and that it is at first sight less discouraging than to take both the terms of the proverb in their literal sense. The metaphor will then remind us of those other passages in which our Lord said that “the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force;”¹ and “Enter ye in at the strait gate, . . . because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.”² It will remind us too of the figure used by two of our poets. “Humble,” says George Herbert,

“Humble we must be if to heaven we go,
High is the roof there, but the gate is low.”

“Heaven’s gate,” says Webster,

“Is not so highly arched
As princes’ palaces; they that enter there
Must go upon their knees.”

The rich man can enter no less easily than the poor man if he will but enter *as* a poor man, laying aside the pomp of earthly circumstance, the thick clay of earthly accumulations, the cares and deceitfulness of riches. There is no difficulty about his entering; the only difficulty lies in his unwillingness to lay aside the gilded burdens which render entrance impossible.

¹ Matt. xi. 12.

² Matt. vii. 13, 14; *cf.* A. xiv. 22; 1 Pet. iv. 18.

3. Yet, after all,—however ingenious, interesting, and valuable, by way of illustration, this explanation of the proverb may be—the obvious interpretation is probably the true one. There can be no doubt of the fact that *at the present day*, in many parts of the East, the small side gate, through which a camel could only pass if it was entirely unladen, and could then only be pushed through on its knees, is familiarly known as the “needle’s eye.” But we have no proof whatever that such a designation existed in ancient days. And, on the other hand, there is proof that, soon after the Christian era, this and similar proverbs were familiar in the East, in their most literal sense, as expressions of impossibility.

Here are some of the Rabbinical passages :—

I. “Rabbi Samuel bar-Nahmeni says, in the name of Rabbi Jonathan, that man only sees in dreams the thoughts of his heart, as Daniel says (Chap. ii. 29). The proof that it is so, observes Raba, is that a dream does not shew us either a palm-tree of gold, or *an elephant passing through a needle’s eye*,”—literally, *ear*. (Bab Berachoth, f. 55*b*. *ad fin*.)

II. “When Rabbi Shesheth had uttered an untenable remark, Rabbi Amram replied, ‘Perhaps you are a Pombadithan,’¹—one of those who send an elephant through a needle’s eye, *i.e.*, as the Aruch² says, “one of those who say impossibilities.” (Babha Metzia, f. 32, 2.)

¹ Pombaditha was a Jewish school, at the mouth of Baditha, a canal between the Tigris and Euphrates, founded in the third century after Christ.

² The Aruch is a Lexicon to the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds, by Nathan Ben Jehiel.

III. In Jevamoth, f. 45, 1, is the not dissimilar proverb, applied to the marvellous tales of travellers, "A camel in Media dances in a cab," *i.e.*, the smallest possible space.¹

These passages prove that the proverb, like "Physician, heal thyself," and others used by our Lord, was one in common use; and the only reason why the elephant is substituted for the camel is because the two first Rabbinic passages come from the Babylonian Gemara, and in Babylona the elephant was common, while in Palestine it was unknown.

It is no slight confirmation of this view that the expression was obviously taken in its most literal sense by one so familiar with camels and with every phase of Eastern life and literature as Mohammed, for in the Koran (Sura vii. 38) we read, "The impious shall *find the gates of heaven shut*; nor shall he enter there *till a camel shall pass through the eye of a needle.*"

Lastly, to shew the literal meaning of the "needle's eye," we may adduce a passage never quoted in Commentaries, but mentioned by Bochart in his "Hierozocion"² and by Buxtorf in his Talmudic Lexicon: "*A needle's eye is not too narrow for two friends, nor is the world wide enough for two enemies.*"³

Such, then, being the meaning of the proverb, did Christ really intend to say that it was "*impossible*" for a rich man to enter the kingdom of

¹ See Lightfoot, Schöttgen, and Meuschen, on Matt. xix. 24.

² Hierozocion, i. 92.

³ "Lex. Talmud," s. v. נקב.

heaven? The fact that He *did* use this very word in his reply to the exclamations into which the Apostles broke, is an additional and decisive proof that this proverb *did* imply, not something which might be conceived of as merely difficult—such as compressing a rope to the dimensions of a needle's eye, or driving a camel through a narrow gate—but something which justifies the emphasis of his assertion, when, with that earnest gaze fixed upon them which two of the Synoptists record,¹ He said to his disciples, "*With men this is impossible.*"

The words which follow sufficiently explain this thought, and prevent the words from lending themselves to any Essene or Ebionite misinterpretation: "but with God all things are possible."

In other words, a rich man *is*, so far as his riches are concerned, in a more difficult position for the attainment of heavenly-mindedness, and, therefore, for that humility of spirit and disengagement from the cares and snares of life, which are essential to all who would enter God's kingdom, than a poor man is. Poverty also has its own temptations, and God either equalizes the lots of men, or, at any rate, sends no severer temptation without also sending "*more grace*" whereby to resist it.² Along with the temptation He provides also the way of escape.³ And, since men have always loved and always will love riches, the Lord desired to force upon us the conviction that if we would increase our wealth we run a terrible risk of also increasing our worldliness. From

¹ Mark x. 27; Matt. xix. 26, ἐμβλέψας . . . αὐτοῖς.

² James iv. 6.

³ I Cor. x. 13, καὶ τὴν ἐκβασιν, not "a" but "the" way of escape.

this inordinate love of riches, simply, we CANNOT be saved by our own power. Left to ourselves we should fail utterly in the attempt to combine the love of God with the deceitfulness of earthly mammon. But we are not left to ourselves. The salvation of the soul in the midst of earthly riches requires *a spiritual miracle*, a miracle of the grace of God. But so far from miracles being rare, we live in the midst of them. Without them no man could be saved at all, least of all any man who has so much about him as the rich have to make this world sweet and easy. Souls are saved, men enter into the heavenly kingdom, in spite of difficulties humanly insuperable, and only because nothing is impossible with God.

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THE FIRST EPISTLE TO TIMOTHY.

CHAPTER V. VERSES 1-16.

THE Apostle continues his practical advice to his son Timothy, and suggests the principle upon which the Church at Ephesus should administer its eleemosynary funds. The indiscriminate and boundless liberality of the Church at Jerusalem in the first gush of its Pentecostal life produced such extreme and agonizing want, that the Apostles were fain to secure help from the converts in Philippi, Corinth, Galatia, and Antioch, for the poor saints in Jerusalem. It does not seem probable that other Churches adopted, or were encouraged to adopt, the principle of virtual communism. Still, He who claimed to be the Judge of the widow, who by the