


SHORT STUDY

The Origin of the ‘Needle’s Eye Gate’ Myth: Theophylact or Anselm?

Agnieszka Ziemińska 

The Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow, Kanonicza 25, 31-002 Krakow, Poland
Email: agnieszka.zieminska@doktorant.upjp2.edu.pl

Abstract

Jesus’ hyperbolic saying that ‘it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven’, present in the synoptic tradition (Matt 19.24; Mark 10.25; Luke 18.25), has long been subject to the suggestion that the ‘eye of a needle’ does not refer to an actual needle but is the name of a small gate in the Jerusalem wall. Today, most biblical scholars are convinced that this theory is incorrect, but no study identifies the sources of the error and traces the history of this myth. This note focuses on tracking the origins of the flaw and points specifically to the sources of the misconception that the term ‘eye of a needle’ should not be taken literally.

The earliest note that mentions a gate called the ‘eye of a needle’ seems to be a gloss attributed to Anselm of Canterbury (11th cent.). This gloss can be found in the thirteenth-century work of Thomas Aquinas *Catena aurea*. What is false, however, is the oft-repeated belief that the source of the information is the eleventh-century *Gospel Commentary* of Theophylact.

Keywords: gate; Jerusalem; needle’s eye; Theophylact; Anselm

Introduction

In the account of the threefold synoptic tradition, we find a saying, put into the mouth of Jesus, about a camel passing through the eye of a needle. The essential purpose of the statement is to show the impossibility (or perhaps difficulty) of the rich man’s entry into the kingdom of heaven. Jesus, in a hyperbolic comparison, mentions two extremes – the largest and the smallest thing – to highlight that impossibility. This radical exclusion of the prospect of the rich being saved by human efforts has not prevented some interpreters from trying to turn the impossible into the possible.¹ This attempt can essentially be reduced to softening the meaning of the hyperbole given by Jesus in two ways:

- (1) the suggestion that a camel is not a camel;
- (2) the postulate that the eye of a needle is not a needle’s eye after all.

The first method suggested that there is an error of itacism in some of the manuscripts.² This suggestion has been thoroughly discussed by scholars, so, apart from this mention, we omit it in the current article altogether.

¹ Cf. R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (NICNT; Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2007) 738.

² On itacism, see J. H. Moulton and W. F. Howard, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*, vol. II: *Accidence and Word-Formation*, Part I: *General Introduction, Sounds and Writing* (Later Printing edition; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark,

The second theory regarding how the name 'needle's eye' could be related to the gate in the wall of Jerusalem is nowadays widely regarded as false. It is indeed difficult to point to ancient testimonies that would support such a thesis. The present article traces and identifies those sources that underpin the claim that the 'eye of a needle' in Jesus' saying referred to a gate.

In Search of the Origin of the Gate Myth

A widely known suggestion was the theory, which gained popularity in the nineteenth century, that the 'eye of a needle' was the name of a small gate in a double portal in the city wall through which pedestrians could pass, without having to open the large gates that would have to be opened for a camel laden with goods to pass. It has been suggested that a camel could with great difficulty squeeze through such a small gate. This conjecture has been repeated so often that it has sometimes been treated as accepted exegesis. Does the hyperbole used by Jesus refer to a gate or literally to a needle? Biblical scholars provide an answer to this question – it is a reference literally to a needle. Why then the false clue that speaks of a gate in the wall of Jerusalem? There is no ancient evidence of the use of the phrase 'eye of a needle' as the name of a gate in the wall of Jerusalem in Jesus' time or earlier in gospel commentaries or in any other extra-biblical sources.³ The historical sources are difficult to track and the information in the works of biblical scholars is scattered and not definitive.

Where then does the gate legend come from? Can we trace and indicate where it has its origin?

A partial explanation of this suggestion was given by J. Gnilka, pointing to one of the oldest sources of information about the 'eye of a needle' being used as the name of a smaller door in the gate of Jerusalem. According to him, this interpretation could come from the writings of the fifteenth-century pilgrim Joannes Poloner.⁴ Indeed, a travelogue entitled by a nineteenth-century editor *Johannis Poloner descriptio Terrae Sanctae* states: 'On the same street is a small door to the south, which in their language is called the eye of a needle, of which the Lord said: It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, etc.'⁵

E. Leigh, a seventeenth-century writer, in his 'Annotations' pointed to Hugh of Saint-Cher as the originator of the concept of the 'eye of a needle' gate.⁶ Indeed, in the 'Postilla' of this thirteenth-century Dominican we find a record: 'There was a gate in Jerusalem which was called the needle, through the opening of which one could not

1919) 65–89; B. M. Metzger and B. D. Ehrman, *The Text of New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005⁴); C. Haebler, 'Itacism', *Brill's New Pauly* (New Pauly Online; Münster: Brill, 2006), available at: <https://referenceworks.brillonline.com:443/entries/brill-s-new-pauly/itacism-e528890> (accessed 6/7/2021); D. Jongkind, *Scribal Habits of Codex Sinaiticus* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2007); J. Thomaskutty, 'Textual Transmission and "Itacism"', *New Testament Scholarship Worldwide*, 30 January 2012, available at: <https://ntscholarship.wordpress.com/2012/01/30/textual-transmission-and-itacism/> (accessed 6/7/2021).

³ See France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 738.

⁴ See J. Gnilka, *Das Matthäusevangelium* (2 vols.; HThK.NT 2; Freiburg: Herder, 1993) II.166. He is considered a Pole (hence the name Poloner).

⁵ In the original: *in eadem platea est portula versus austrum, quae lingua eorum foramen acus dicitur, de qua Dominus dixit: Facilius est, camelum ire per foramen acus etc.* (translation mine). J. Poloner, 'Johannis Poloner descriptio Terrae Sanctae', *Descriptio Terrae Sanctae ex saeculis VIII IX XII XV* (ed. T. Tobler; Leipzig: J. C. Hinrich, 1874) 225–81, at 240.

⁶ E. Leigh, *Annotations upon All The New Testament Philologicall and Theologicall wherein the Emphasis and Elegancie of the Greeke Is Observed, Some Imperfections in our Translation Are Discovered, Divers Jewish Rites and Customes Tending to Illustrate the Text Are Mentioned, Many Antilogies and Seeming Contradictions Reconciled, Severall Darke and Obscure Places Opened, Sundry Passages Vindicated from the False Glosses of Papists and Hereticks* (London: W. W. and E. G. for William Lee, 1650) 5–2, available at: <http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12024/A50050> (accessed 21/10/2021).

pass unless unencumbered.⁷ At present, this source is rarely mentioned. Due to the existence of an earlier testimony, it cannot be considered primary either.

There is another medieval source mentioned in homiletic and pastoral texts.⁸ Some authors have proposed that it was the eleventh-century monk Theophylact in his *Gospel Commentary* who first referred to the ‘eye of a needle’ gate. However, they do not point to a specific place in Theophylact’s work. The problem is that this is a false trail. Theophylact nowhere states that the ‘needle’s eye’ is a gate in the wall of Jerusalem. In the commentary on Matt 19.24, he only writes that ‘some say that “camel” is not the animal, but the thick cable used by sailors to cast their anchors’, but there is no mention of gates, doors or other types of entrance.⁹ In the Western world, the hypothesis of Theophylact being the author of the concept of a gateway called the ‘eye of a needle’ became popular probably through an entry in the sixteenth-century Geneva Bible. The annotation in the margin to Matt 19.24 refers to Theophylact’s comment.¹⁰ It refers to the view that the camel meant a rope but makes no mention of a gate. It was, however, close to attributing to Theophylact, known through the Geneva Bible for his rational explanations of Jesus’ words, also the notion about the ‘needle’s eye’ gate. The trope pointing to Theophylact’s commentary as the first known source, although repeated, must be considered false.

The earliest reference to a gate named ‘eye of a needle’ in the wall of seems to be in the work of Thomas Aquinas, the so-called *Catena aurea* (‘Golden Chain’), which is a collection of commentaries by Latin and Greek fathers and other theologians as well as anonymous glosses on the four Gospels.¹¹ It is in one such anonymous gloss to Matt 19.24, which was later attributed to Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109), that we find the statement: ‘There was a certain gate in Jerusalem, which is the eye of a needle, it was said, through which a camel, unless on bended knees having laid aside a burden, could not pass.’¹² If the authorship of the gloss is correctly attributed, we have indirect evidence for a source from the eleventh/twelfth century.

⁷ Hugh of Saint-Cher, *Postilla Hugonis de Sancto Charo*, vol. vi (Venice: N. Pezzana, 1703) 65, available at: http://sermones.net/_postille/image.php?vol=6&img=66 (accessed 21/10/2021): *porta erat in Jerusalem, quae acus dicebatur, per cuius foramen non nisi inonerati transire poterant.*

⁸ For example, B. Evans, ‘Through the Eye of a Needle’, Preacher’s Study Blog, 3 December 2008, available at: <https://preachersstudyblog.com/2008/12/through-the-eye-of-a-needle/> (accessed 12/8/2021); G. D. Fee and D. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2014⁴) 29; N. Somin, ‘Can a Camel Go through the Ears of a Needle?’, *Fingernal*, 12 August 2021, available at: <https://fingernal.ru/en/design/mozhet-li-verblyud-proiti-skvoz-igolnye-ushi-verblyud-i-igolnoe-ushko/> (accessed 12/8/2021).

⁹ Theophylact, ‘Theophylact of Ochrid on Matthew 19:24’, *Catena Bible Comment*, available at: <https://catenabible.com/com/58a5ce5154b4f95416b2f74c> (accessed 12/8/2021). The works of Theophylact are available from the British Library in the digitised manuscripts section at: www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Add_MS_19386, catalogued under Add MS 19386 (thirteenth-century manuscript); modern English translation: Theophylact of Ochrid, *The Explanation of the* (4 vols.; The Great Collection of the Lives of the Saints; Manchester, MO: Chrysostom Press, Orthodox Classics in English, 1992).

¹⁰ G. T. Sheppard, ed., *The Geneva Bible: The Annotated New Testament, 1602 Edition* (New York: Pilgrim, 1989), available at: <https://archive.org/details/genevabibleannot0000unse/page/n75/> (accessed 20/10/2021) (annotation to Matt 19.24).

¹¹ See W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison, Jr, *Matthew*, vol. iii: 1–28 (A & C Black, 1988) 51; D. C. Allison, Jr, ‘Eye of the Needle’, *Encyclopedia of the Bible and its Reception* (De Gruyter, 2013), available at: www.degruyter.com/database/EBR/entry/key_eaabf77e-8478-4742-b816-b490253dd372/html (accessed 22/10/2021).

¹² In the original: *Hierosolymis quaedam porta erat, quae foramen acus dicebatur, per quam camelus, nisi deposito onere et flexis genibus, transire non poterat* (translation mine). Tomas Aquinas, *Catena aurea: Commentary on the Gospels from the Fathers*, vol. 1: *St Matthew*, Part III (Oxford: John Henry Parker/J. G. F. and J. Rivington, 1842), available at: <http://dhspryory.org/thomas/CAMatthew.htm> (accessed 13/8/2021) 19, 6. Regarding Anselm see F. L. Gross, ed., ‘Anselm of Canterbury’, *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

We are unable to answer conclusively whether the aforementioned Hugh of Saint-Cher used Anselm's material or whether the two of them had some other, possibly common, source of the gate legend.

Conclusions

The procedure that tried to undermine the meaning of Jesus' hyperbole suggested that, although with difficulty, the rich could get through to the kingdom of heaven. This is however an error of anachronism and, as argued, a repetition of a false assumption, based on the misinformation that it was Theophylact who wrote about a gate called the 'eye of a needle'. The passage about a huge pack animal passing through an unusually small opening was a saying used in Semitic circles to denote the impossibility of performing a task. Hence, it was most likely put into the mouth of Jesus. It emphasises the difficulty of a rich person getting into the kingdom of God by contrasting a large animal (the camel) and a tiny hole (the eye of a needle). The statement is radical and should remain so.

Of the four identified sources for the gate myth, Theophylact's commentary must be rejected. It is not true that he mentions the existence of a gate in the wall of Jerusalem called the 'eye of a needle'. Assuming that the gloss in the *Catena aurea* is indeed by Anselm, it would be the earliest known contemporary mention of the 'eye of a needle' gate. If Anselm and Hugh of Saint-Cher had access to some earlier common source, perhaps a future generation of scholars will discover it and thus change the present conclusion.

Competing interests. The author declares none.