

19When Yeshua had finished these sayings, he left Galilee and went into the border of Judah to the other side of the Yarden. ²A great multitude followed him, and he healed them there. ³Some Pharisees came up to him to test him. They asked, Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?

commentary

19:1 he left Galilee – In this version he goes to Judah and would not return anymore to his hometown. Luke’s version narrates a detour to other regions, such as Samaria. It is impossible to know whether Mattai is omitting Luke’s details or whether the two versions are different, and if so, it is hard to tell which version would be historically accurate. The Judah location serves to portray the confrontation between Yosef (i.e., Yeshua) and Yehuda (The Judeans), for as seen in Genesis, Yehuda’s transformation as the leader of the family only takes place after his encounter with Yosef (*Gen. 44:16*).

19:3 to test him – Greek manuscripts, “to tempt him.” In Hebrew le’nasoto **לְנִסּוֹתוֹ**; to test him, to examine him. The Aramaic (**וּמְנִסִּין**) can mean both “testing him” or “tempting him.” To test is contextually more accurate than to tempt. They were not tempting him to sin, but testing his responses, because the Torah commands about a prophet that performs signs or miracles, that if his teachings go against God, or against his Torah, not to listen to him (*Deut. 13:1-5*; cf. *Sotah 14a*). Some among the Pharisees would feel curiosity for Yeshua’s outlook on the Torah, wanting to know whether his teachings were legitimate or heretic. Some of them would genuinely want to learn new insights from him, as the Hassidic Galilean worldview and the Judean Pharisaism had different interpretative approaches. Chapter 22 speaks of a scribe who wanted to test Yeshua as well. The same scribe and his story are mentioned in Mark, and rather than enmity, the author portrays a friendly conversation between the two. Therefore, being “tested” does not necessarily carry a negative connotation as commonly thought. After all, it is not unusual for Rabbis to question and to test each other. There is the story of Peleimu who, questioning a Rabbi, asked which head should wear tefillin in case a man had two heads. The rabbi told him to go away for asking such stupid question, but then Heaven sent to him an actual man with two heads, and he saw himself in the position to solve the question (cf. *Menakhot 37a*). The way Judaism gains understanding is by testing and questioning rather than thinking to have everything figured out and taken for granted; this is the Talmudic system. This often leads to arguments, and we must understand there are arguments for the sake of Heaven and arguments that are not for its sake: “The argument between Hillel and Shammai (was for the sake of heaven). In their debates, one of them would render a decision and the other would argue against it, out of a desire to discover the truth, not out of cantankerousness or a wish to prevail over his fellow. An argument not for the sake of Heaven was that of Qorakh and his company, for they came to undermine Moshe rabbeinu, may he rest in peace, and his position, out of envy and contentiousness and ambition for victory” (*Rabbi Meiri on Avot 5:17*).

19:3 Is it lawful... to divorce... for any cause? – This question was a hallakhic debate between the houses of Hillel and Shammai during the first century. The debate went on for one century, as in order to validate Beit Hillel the Gemara quotes the opinion of Rabbi Aqiva, who died in the second century. The dispute was intended to reveal a proper interpretation for the passage in Deuteronomy which discusses the bill of divorcement.^a The Torah says, “Because he has found ‘ervat davar’ in her” (*Deut. 24:1*). The reasoning of Shammai’s school was that since ‘erva’ meant nakedness, and “discovering nakedness” in the Torah is an euphemism for sex, the bill of divorcement could only be given in cases where forbidden sex took place (literally, devar ervat, cases of nakedness). However, Beit Hillel would have a more indulgent interpretation, allowing divorcement for every unseemly matter, for any cause, “even if she burns his food” (*Gittin 90a*).

^a There are other Biblical reasons for divorcement, but they are not part of the discussion.

⁴He replied and said to them, Have you not read that at the beginning the Creator made them male and female? ⁵And he said, For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh? ⁶So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate. ⁷They asked, Why then did Moshe command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away? ⁸Yeshua replied, Moshe permitted you to divorce your wives because of the hardness in your hearts. But from the beginning it was not so.

—commentary—

Rabbi Aqiva derives it from the phrase, “she finds no favour in his eyes” (*Deut. 24:1*). Therefore, given that Yeshua was shown agreeing with Beit Hillel in chapter 5, these Pharisees are asking him, “Is the school of Hillel correct concerning the bill of divorcement?”

19:4 Have you not read that at the beginning – He responds from mussar. “The hardness in your hearts” is heavy evidence of ethical reasoning rather than hallakhic. At the beginning, that is, in the book of Bereshit (i.e., Genesis). He quotes two verses: “made them male and female” (*Gen. 1:27*) and “the two will become one flesh” (*Gen. 2:24*). “The phrase, {man} shall cleave to his woman (*Gen. 2:24*), alludes to marriage” (*Bava Bathra 113a*). There are three secret disciplines derived from Genesis: Hilkhoh Bereshit, Hilkhoh Yetzirah and Sitrei Arayot; the secrets of unchastity (*Mishna Hagiga 2:1*). The ‘Beginning’ is the blueprint for Torat Sinai, and in the primordial Torah there is no room for divorcement. All the cosmic dynamics of existence are ruled by the two forces of female energy (vessel, understanding) and male energy (bestower, light, wisdom); they complement each other and work in harmony as a single unity to birth reality, and the same principle applies to marriage. Marriage is a return to the original oneness that existed prior to the concept of duality that permeated existence after the concealment of God’s light in this world.

19:6 they are no longer two, but one flesh – “A person’s wife is as his own body” (*Menakhot 93a*). The Zohar goes as far as to say “husband and wife are two halves of the same soul” (*Zohar III:7b, 109b*). There are certainly things about your own body that you may not like, or maybe there is a part of your body that does not work properly. However, you do not chop it off, instead, you learn to live with it and try to do your best with it. After all, it is your own body. The only time you feel like amputating your limbs is when they become toxic for the wellbeing of the entire body, and even then, the amputation is very painful and dramatic. Divorcing the person you were attached to and shared your life with feels exactly like a limb’s amputation, as it is written, “bone of my bones” (*Gen. 2:23*). “Anyone who divorces his first wife, even the altar sheds tears” (*Sanhedrin 22a*).

19:6 what God has joined together, let no one separate – The prophet wrote, “I hate divorce” (*Mal. 2:16*), and the sages explain: “He who divorces his wife is hated by the Blessed Holy One” (*Gittin 90b*).

18:8 Because of the hardness in your hearts – There is a distinction between God’s perfect will and God’s permissive will. The perfect will is that which he intended for humankind in the beginning, and the permissive will are those rules that he established and permitted due to humankind being sinners. If God gave a straight “No” to everything, we would be irremediably lost. For instance, God’s perfect will for Israel was to go and conquer Canaan, but because people demanded to send spies, he gave the command to send spies as his permissive will (*Deut. 1:21-22*). God created Adam vegetarian (*Gen. 1:29*), but he regulated the consumption of certain animals due to human’s nature. The same way, God regulated the sacrificial system due to humans already offering sacrifices (*Gen. 4:4*), but they were the means to a goal, for his original intention was for thoughtful prayers that got man closer to God, rather than bull offerings (*Hoshea 14:4; Jer. 7:22*). In this context is that the bill of divorcement is included within the laws of the Torah, not because God wants it, but because he knows it was necessary, because of our evil inclinations. Yeshua’s Hassidut presupposes the mentality of the kingdom of Heaven,^b and in it there is no room for sexual sin, neither for divorcement. But if divorcement must happen, better there be a good reason for it.

^b See commentary on Matthew 5:20.

⁹I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except in case of adultery, and takes another commits adultery, and he who takes such woman thus separated commits adultery. ¹⁰The disciples said to him, If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry. ¹¹Yeshua replied, Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given. ¹²For there are eunuchs who were born that way from their mother's womb, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men—and there are those who choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to receive it, let him receive it.

—commentary—

19:9 he who takes such woman thus separated commits adultery – As it is written: “And she goes and becomes another [akher] man's wife” (*Deut. 24:1–2*). The context being a woman who has been divorced due to sexual immorality. The sages explain, “The verse called the second husband akher; i.e., another, to state that this man is not a peer of the first husband. They are morally distinct, as that first husband evicted a wicked woman from his house and this second man introduced a wicked woman into his house” (*Gittin 90b*).

19:10 If this is the situation... it is better not to marry – This back-and-forth between Yeshua and his disciples is similar to the conversation Beit Hillel has with Beit Shammai concerning what makes a divorce valid. One makes a point and the other responds with something else. Similarly the school of Shammai said it would have been better if man had not been created, and the school of Hillel responded it is better for man to have been created (*Eiruvim 13b*). In this case, the disciples are saying: Since according to the ideal standards of the Messianic era a man should not divorce his wife at all, it would be better for man not to marry at all, because what if he marries a woman that is hateful and detestable to him, and yet she never cheats on him? He would never be able to divorce her and the two of them would live a miserable marriage life, as it is written: “I find more bitter than death the woman” (*Eccl. 7:26*). This is what Beit Hillel was trying to avoid, and this is why the hallakha ended up going according to Beit Hillel. This is, therefore, why Yeshua's statement is not hallakhically binding, albeit true and more idealistic. Such is one possible interpretation for the first time he says, “Not everyone can accept this word.” Not everyone can accept it as the norm.

19:11 Not everyone can accept this word – This can be interpreted in two different ways. “This word” can refer to Yeshua's teaching about not divorcing one's wife, as stated above. It can also refer to the disciples' statement that it is better not to get married at all. Contextually the phrase may carry the two meanings simultaneously, although the later is more emphatic due to the next paragraph. According to Rabbi Lichtenstein, in this verse Yeshua is forbidding his disciples to live unmarried, and he quotes the passage “He who does not have a wife, does not have joy” (*Yevamot 62b*). Similarly the Scripture says “Whoever finds a wife finds goodness” (*Prov. 18:22*).

19:12 He who is able to receive it, let him receive it – Meaning, the only people who should not marry are those who have been heavenly called to live in celibacy because of very specific circumstances – i.e., for instance, there are those who feel no attraction towards women (because they were born this way or their sexual organs were amputated). But this should not be the norm for common nor religious people. Groups among the Essenes often chose a life of marital abstinence for the sake of the kingdom of heaven (cf. *Josephus, Wars 2:120-121; Ploni, Natural History 5:73*), as did some among the priests (cf. *Niddah 38a*), in a similar fashion to what Moshe did in order to remain in a state of permanent prophecy. However, such form of life was rejected by the general Pharisaic schools, because if everybody chose that form of life, human race would go extinct, for the command is to “be fruitful and multiply.” Similarly, the Zadokite fragment at Qumran – usually attributed to the Essenes – talks about marriage as the norm for everybody “The foundation of creation is: male and female he created them, and those who entered the ark, two of each – male and female – came into the ark.” (*Tzadoqit fragments 4:20, 5:2*). When people not called to celibacy live a life of abstinence, the evil inclination usually clings to them hardy and leads them to concealed sexual sins and shame in obscurity, as it is written: “It is not good for man to be single” (*Gen. 2:18*). This is why it is imperative to notice that not everybody can receive to live unmarried as the disciples suggested. It is worth noting that although the Nazarene texts do not deepen into the private lives of Yeshua and his close disciples, there are verses that demonstrate they indeed had families (cf. *Matt. 8:14-17*), which debunks the later Roman dogma of priests and nuns having to be celibate. “Anyone who does not want to be fruitful and multiply diminishes the Divine Image in the world, as it is written, in the image of God he made man [male

¹³Then they brought children to him so that he may place his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuked them. ¹⁴Yeshua himself said, Allow the children to come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to those who are like them. ¹⁵When he had placed his hands on them, he went on from there. ¹⁶Just then a man came up to him and asked, Good teacher, what must I do to get eternal life?

—textual variants—

19:16 Good teacher – Codex Sinaiticus and Vaticanus omit the adjective “Good” in this sentence or misplace it into the question: What good must I do... etc. To what Yeshua would respond “why do you ask me about the good?” Needless to say, this drastically alters the meaning of the passage. However, this variant only occurs in these two codices and the adjective does appear in the vast majority of manuscripts – including the Byzantine majority and the Semitic manuscripts (*Old Syriac, Peshitta, DuTillet... etc*). Additionally, it also appears in the parallels of Mark and Luke without variation. This and Yeshua’s later response, “No one is good except God” shows that the adjective was there, at least in the original version of Mattai.

19:16 Good teacher – It is written in the gospel according to the Hebrews, “Another rich man said to him, Teacher, what mitzva can I do to live? He responded, O man, do that which is in the Torah and the prophets. He answered him, I have kept them. He said to him, Go, sell all your possessions and divide them among the poor, and come and follow me. But the rich man began to scratch his head for it did not please him. And the master said to him, How can you say, I have done the Torah and the prophets when it is written in the Torah, Love your neighbor as yourself? And behold, many of your brethren, sons of Avraham, are clad in filth, dying of hunger, and your house is full of many good things, and nothing at all goes out of it to them. And he turned and said to Shimon his disciple, who was sitting by him, Shimon son of Yonah, 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 heaven” (*Latin Pseudo-Origen on Matt. 5:14 – Vetus interpretatio*). This version, which parallels Mattai 19:16-26, narrates the story differently, providing more light into the original encounter between Yeshua and this rich man.

—commentary—

and female]” (*Yevamot 63b*). Rabbi Ben Azzai did not want to get married because he said there are others already fulfilling this command, and his soul only desired the Torah. The other sages were said about him: You teach well [about marriage] but you do not fulfill well” (*Yevamot 63b*). In other words, you do not do what you teach, neither teach about something you know.

19:14 Allow the children to come to me – “Jerusalem would not have been destroyed if schoolchildren would not have been interrupted [from learning Torah], as it is written (*Jer. 6:11*) pour it on the infants in the streets. Why is there wrath being poured? Because the infants were outside [rather than inside, learning Torah]” (*Shabbat 119b*). The Gemara interprets homiletically the verse “Do not touch my anointed ones and do not harm my prophets” (*1Chronicles 16:22*). Anointed ones, in Hebrew meshikhai משיחי; my messiahs. Rav said that ‘anointed ones’ refers to schoolchildren and ‘prophets’ refers to Torah scholars. Children are called anointed ones “because they are as precious as kings and priests” (*Maharsa on Shabbat 119b*). Reish Laqish said in the name of Yehuda Nesia, “The world is sustained by the **הבל** breathe of schoolchildren... What’s the difference between my breathe and that of children? One is a breathe tainted by sin and the other is not” (*Shabbat 119b*).

19:14 for the kingdom of heaven belongs to those who are like them – As explained in the previous chapter.

19:16 a man came up – When introducing the good deeds of this person verse 20 uses the term “young man,” in Hebrew naar נער. This alludes to him being in a righteous path of spiritual growth. Because of this, the oral tradition recorded in Luke’s version calls him “a certain leader [of the synagogue? Of the Sanhedrin?]” (*Luke 18:18*). The text does not give much information, but he was definitely a Pharisee.

19:16 what must I do – Or as many manuscripts read: What good [deed] must I do? In other words, what mitzva must I do? Notice the Markan version says, “Good teacher, what must I do...”.

¹⁷Yeshua replied, Why do you call me good? No one is good except God. But if you want to enter life, keep the mitzvot. ¹⁸He inquired, Which ones? Yeshua replied, You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, ¹⁹honor your father and mother, and love your neighbor as yourself. ²⁰The young man said to him, All these I have kept from my childhood, What do I lack?

—commentary—

19:17 Why do you call me good? – See parallel in Mark 10:18. All source of goodness comes from the Creator, as it has been taught: “The Blessed Holy One wanted to bestow complete goodness upon his creations, and saw that for this purpose it was necessary that they receive it through merit and not in charity” (*Daat Tevunot* 70 [43]). “The Blessed Holy One does not other thing than goodness” (*ibid.* 191), and “when he will reveal his goodness, negativity will no longer be” (*ibid.* 69 [42]). A man does not perform goodness except by emulating the attributes of the Creator. Even the best human in the world is born with a tendency to do evil – the yetzer haRa. It is therefore written “Sin crouches at [every man’s] door” (*Gen. 4:7*) and again, “There is no man who does not sin” (*1Kings 8:46*). Shlomoh also wrote, “Certainly, there is no righteous man on earth who does good and never sins אִשָּׁה” (*Eccl. 7:20*). Even the greatest prophet, Moshe Rabbeinu, made a mistake by getting angry and not following exactly the instructions God gave him (cf. *Numbers 20:8-12*), and David, a man after God’s heart, had an affair with Uriah’s wife (*2Sam. 12:9*). Because of the human tendency to do evil, even the most righteous men on earth – who have never sinned with their deeds – have sinful thoughts and a desire to sin in their thoughts. “The greater a man is, the greater is his desire to do evil” (*Sukka 52a*). Therefore, with the words, “No one is good except God,” Yeshua is distancing all creatures – even himself – from the perfect goodness of the Creator himself.

19:18 Yeshua replied, You shall not murder... – In the gospel according to the Hebrews Yeshua simply responds “obey what the Torah and the prophets say.” In this one he mentions the commands of the Decalogue which are specific of the relationship between humans (cf. *Exodus 20:12-16*). Since the man asked about “good deeds,” Yeshua sums up all good deeds as those which a man can do to his fellow man. He then sums them up even further with the command “Love your neighbor as yourself” (*Lev. 19:18*). This is similar to what it has been taught: “The prophet Micah established the entire Torah upon three principles... Isaiah then established it upon two... and then Habaquq established it upon one, as it is written, The righteous shall live by his faith” (*Makkot 24a*). Rabbi Aqiva said, “Love your neighbour as yourself is an all-embracing principle in the Torah” (*Sifra Qedshim 4:12; Torat Qohanim 19:45*). Similarly Rabbi Hillel established the entire Torah on this principle: “What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor, this is the entire Torah, the rest is just commentary, now go and study” (*Shabbat 321a*). Mark’s version opens with “You already know the commands.” In Luke’s version it is not Yeshua who offers this response, but rather he responds his question with another question: What do you think? How do you interpret the Torah? And when the man comes up with such response Yeshua replies: “You have answered well” (*Luke 10:26-28*).

19:20 What do I lack? – In the Markan version it says that when the man responded “I have kept these from my childhood” Yeshua looked at him and loved him (*Mark 10:21*). The man asking “What do I lack” in Mattai’s version poses some difficulty. He has been keeping the mitzvot, and yet it seems he was expecting some kind of revelatory or life-changing response from Yeshua. Was not the obvious enough? What type of answer did he expect? Either he was not spiritually satisfied with his outwardly pharisaic observance of the Torah or he was expecting that Yeshua, as promoter of the kingdom of heaven, commanded something else. In the Markan version it is Yeshua who says “One thing you still lack,” which makes it parallel to the version of the story recorded in the gospel according to the Hebrews.

²¹Yeshua answered, If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have a treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me. ²²When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth.

commentary

19:21 If you want to be perfect – Notice Yeshua does not say “If you want to go into the World to Come” or “to gain eternal life.” The answer to that was clearly “obey the commands.” This instruction was only “if you want to be perfect;” i.e., if you want to feel whole and have peace within, if you want to be blameless and enter into the messianic era today.

19:21 sell your possessions – Rabbi Soloveitchik interprets this to mean that Yeshua demanded a life of abstinence like the Essenes. Josephus spoke about these Essenes: “They are despisers of wealth — their communal stock is astonishing — one cannot find a person among them who has more in terms of possessions. For by a law, those coming into the school must yield up their funds to the order, with the result that in all [their ranks] neither the humiliation of poverty nor the superiority of wealth is detectable, but the assets of each one have been mixed in together, as if they were brothers, to create one fund for all (*Wars II:8:122*). Philo also says about them (at least four thousand of them): “Among all men they alone are without money and without possession, but nevertheless they are the richest of all, because they regard contentment and frugality as riches” (*Every Good man is free 12:77*). In a similar fashion to the Essenes described by Philo and Josephus, it is said that Yeshua and his followers shared a communal sack of money (cf. *John 12:6*). Because, as Keifa states: “we have left everything to follow you.” Later on, the Nazarenes would move to live communally in the Temple area, having “no silver nor gold” (*Acts 3:6*) and calling themselves “evionim” (the poor ones). Regardless of this, it must be noticed that for the most part Yeshua followed a middle path, a more traditional Pharisaic approach, and that the disciples “leaving everything” did not literally imply absolutely everything, as Keifa is described as having his own home, where his wife and mother-in-law lived (cf. *Matt. 8:14*). Later on, the sages would establish as the common halakhic rule that a person should not give to charity more than one fifth of his possessions, less he becomes destitute and in need of social help (*Ketuvot 50a*). Prior to this law, though, there were cases where Pharisees demanded a similar devotion to their disciples, as we will see below, so it was not unique to the Essenes.

19:21 and give to the poor... then come, follow me – Rabba bar Avuh said to a pagan: “Go sell everything that you have, including your objects of idol worship, and then come back to me to convert” (*Avoda Zara 64a*). It is likely that Yeshua demanded such thing to this rich man because he was, first of all, desiring a deeper spirituality and, secondly, because it was necessary for him to start a new life by detaching himself of his material possessions, which he was unknowingly idolizing by not sharing them with the needy. For the Hassidim charity is not a voluntary act, it is a necessity in order to fulfill the command to love your neighbour as yourself. In the gospel according to the Hebrews Yeshua asks, How do you claim you... love your neighbour as yourself when “your neighbours... are... dying of hunger, and your house is full of many good things, and nothing at all goes out of it unto them?”

19:21 you will have a treasure in heaven – In the gospel according of the Hebrews this passage reads as an individual story, but in the synoptics the passage serves as a recollection of various sayings of Yeshua, namely: “The kingdom of the Father is like a merchant who had a load of goods and discovered a pearl. That merchant was shrewd. He sold the load and bought the pearl alone for himself. You too, seek his unfailling and enduring treasure where no moth comes near to devour and no worm destroys” (*Thomas #76*). In Mattai: “When [the merchant] found a pearl of great price he went away and sold everything he had and bought it” (*Matt. 13:46*). “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth... store up for yourselves treasures in heaven... for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (*Matt. 6:19-21*). From a certain point of view, the passages of Yeshua telling the rich man to sell everything and of Rabba bar Avuh telling the pagan to sell everything before converting convey the same idea: In order to follow a life of Torah and good deeds, which is the true treasure of man, you must leave behind those elements which make you cling to materialism and sin and start over. As in the story of the exodus, if you want the absolute freedom of the Promised Land, there is a cost: you must leave Egypt behind. Because the wealth and the vices of this world pass away, but righteousness and good deeds remain forever, as it is written: “Your righteousness shall go before you, and the glory of HaShem shall be your reward” (*Isa. 58:8*; cf. *Bava Bathra 11a*).

²³Then Yeshua said to his disciples, Amen I tell you, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. ²⁴Again I tell you, 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.

commentary

19:23 it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven – There are two points to notice on this sentence: (1) It does not say it is “impossible,” but “hard,” which is different. How hard, it will be explained in the next verse. (2) the kingdom of heaven does not imply necessarily the World to Come. Entering the kingdom is a reference to the inner transformation that is required in order to bring about and reveal the Messianic era into one’s life as well as into this physical world. One is saved from his evil inclination by going beyond the letter of the Torah (see commentary on 5:20). Let us remember the kingdom is not a world that exists after death. The kingdom is the revelation of the Creator in this world. “The kingdom of heaven comes without observation... because the kingdom is within and all around... the kingdom is spread all around the earth and people do not see it” (Luke 17:21; Thomas #3b, #113).

19:24 easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle – In some modern Syrian cities the narrow gate for foot-passengers at the side of the larger gate – by which wagons and camels enter – is known as the needle’s eye, and some scholars suggest Yeshua is alluding to this. However, the almost impossible imagery of something big going through the eye of a needle is a common Semitic idiom. Explaining how dreams do not show things which a person does not think about, the sages say that dreams do not show “an elephant going through the eye of a needle” (*Berakhot* 55b). About the people of Pumbedita making impossible reasonings the sages also used the expression “they pass an elephant through the eye of a needle” (*Bava Metzia* 38a). The eye of a needle is commonly used as a symbol for something very small.^c Trying to fit something big into it is a proverbial way of saying it is impossible or very difficult. But Yeshua does not mean absolutely impossible, for “with God all things are possible.” This is what the midrash teaches: “When Moshe was told to assemble all the people at the entrance of the Tabernacle, he turned to God saying, How can six hundred thousand men... fit into the entrance of the Tabernacle? God replied, Was not the heaven at one time no bigger than the eye of a needle and I managed to fit the entire earth through it?... In the future too this miracle will occur, and at that time God will say, I will expand the size of Jerusalem” (*Rabbeinu Bahya, Vayiqra* 8:4). “Jerusalem itself will spread out in all directions” (*Zohar* 2:220a). In the midrash, the Creator teaches, “Open up for me an entrance like the eye of a needle and in turn I will enlarge it to be an opening through which wagons can enter” (*Shir HaShirim Rabbah* 5:2). In other words, if we trust God and do our part, God will do his.

19:24 for a rich man – Many who interpret the passage like Rabbi Soloveitchik does – i.e., identifying Yeshua’s words with Josephus’ description of the Essenes (“they despise wealth”) – have come to the erroneous conclusion that wealth is evil and that a wealthy person is lost. Many are those who misquote the Pauline’s words, “money is the root of all evil.” There are many reasons to disagree with such conclusion. Firstly, that among Yeshua’s followers there were rich people. In fact his burial tomb was purchased by one of them (*Matt.* 27:57). Another reason has already been stated, namely, Yeshua’s tendency to side more with the Pharisees, and more specifically with the moderate school of Hillel than with radical philosophies. The sages taught the dangers of such mentality: “A person who falls into poverty [and loses his ability to contribute to society] is considered [Biblically] dead” (*Nedarim* 64b). The sages actually praised the wealthy men. But which ones? Certainly not all of them, but those who used their resources to help the needy; in their words, those who “preserved mercy and truth” (*Eiruvim* 86a). Yeshua’s words, therefore, refer to those of whom the Psalm says “their trust is in their wealth and they boast of their great riches” (*Psalms* 49:7). In fact some manuscripts in Mark read “How hard it is for those who trust in riches enter the kingdom of God” (cf. *Mark* 10:24). Lastly, the Pauline passage did not say that “money is the root of all evil,” but “greed (In Greek: Philargyria φιλαργυρία) is the root for all types of evil. By craving after it some err from the faith” (*1Tim.* 6:10). Clearly, the Aramaic version, “love of money” is an euphemism for avarice here and it is not saying anything negative about money itself.

^c See the “eye of a needle” as an expression of smallness in Megillah 19b, Bereshit Rabbah 1:3, Eiruvim 53a, Berakhot 55b.... etc

²⁵When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and asked, Who then can be saved? ²⁶Yeshua looked at them and said, With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible. ²⁷Keifa answered him, Look, we have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?

commentary

19:25 Who then can be saved? – It is not coincidence that this story was in the same chapter with the question about divorce. In the two stories Yeshua is approached by Judean upright people with specific questions about the kingdom. In both stories Yeshua's response seems to be more radical than usually expected, and in both passages the disciples have a strong reaction. In the former one they said, If this is the case, it is better not getting married at all. In the later, after hearing of the man having kept all the mitzvot from youth, and then seeing him unable to get into the perfection he desires, Yeshua tells them how difficult is for a rich person to enter the kingdom, so they react: Who then can be saved? But saved from what? Yeshua had already stated one enters life by observing the mitzvot. But what Yeshua had said about the rich man caused them to wonder. Can a man be saved from his evil inclination, from his greed, from his lusts? For such things interfere with their observance, causing them to be merely external and not from heart.

19:26 With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible – I wish people read this principle a million times until it is engraved in their minds. Somewhere else he said: "Everything is possible for he who believes" (*Mark 9:23*). Come and see, for this is what this passage means: Some of us have the assumption that somehow we are living a righteous life. Like this young man, we perhaps keep the commandments from youth, attend synagogue, study Torah and live a general pious religious life. And while there are certainly merits to it, our ego causes us to believe that we are gaining salvation by our own effort. But then, because we are in constant contact with holiness, the Messianic spark which was dormant awakens within us (descends to Judea) and reveals our deepest thoughts, our true nature, it reveals the true intention with which we perform those good deeds. It often demands a proof of faith from us. "If you want to be perfect, sell all your possessions and give them to the poor." Or in the case of Avraham, "take your most beloved child to Moriah and bring him up there as a burnt offering" (*Gen. 22:2*). Would you do it like Avraham did, or would you turn back and walk away like the young man did? This is where righteousness and salvation come from; not because we are perfect, for as long as we live in the world of correction, perfection does not exist. "Righteousness, righteousness you shall pursue" (*Deut. 16:20*) means that we are not perfect; otherwise we would not be commanded to "pursue" it, after all, in our nature is the evil inclination. But God with his mercy justifies him who, living in fidelity, makes of pursuing righteousness a way of life, not just in external deeds, but in the heart, as it is written: "circumcise your hearts" (*Deut. 10:16*). The young rich man was too attached to the physical world and did not fulfil the command to love his neighbour. Sometimes we, like him, disregard those who need us (family or fellow) justifying our behavior with Torah observance. On the other hand, Avraham had to leave his family – idol sellers – behind. Sometimes we hesitate to leave behind toxic character traits or toxic people because we are physically attached to them more than to God. In the case of Avraham, he was justified only for the inner reason that he obeyed the call, as it is written, because he "believed in God, and it was counted to him as righteousness" (*Gen. 15:6*). Hence the teaching goes full circle: "No one is good except God," and all of us are justified before him by faith, as it has been explained: "the righteous shall live by his faith" (*Hab. 2:4*), which is the principle that sums up the entire Torah (cf. *Makkot 24a*). Our obedience in the moment of test proves that we live in true emunah, as Yeshua taught: "If you had faith like a mustard seed... nothing would be impossible for you" (*Matt. 17:20*). Open up for him an entrance like the eye of a needle and he will enlarge it, and wagons of salvation will enter through it.

19:27 we have left everything to follow you – They responded to Yeshua's call: "follow me," and became itinerant preachers. Let us emphasize that Keifa still retained his home in Galilee, but they had become fulltime workers for the kingdom. Keifa, as the representative of the twelve, wonders: Is there any benefits in doing so when it comes to the kingdom of God?

²⁸Yeshua said to them, Amen I say to you, at the renewal of the world, when the son of man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve seats, and you will judge the twelve tribes of Israel. ²⁹And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life.

—textual variants—

19:29 or mother or wife – Some manuscripts do not have “wife.”

—commentary—

19:28 you will judge the twelve tribes of Israel – With this language Yeshua is praising the level of righteousness that his disciples would reach if they honestly deny their own joy in this life and commit themselves to establishing the kingdom of God. When he says “You will sit on twelve seats” it should not be taken at face value, for he is using a meta-language that transcends his physical disciples. At least one of them would betray him, Yeshua being aware of it as per the gospels. The number twelve in this case is inclusive for the body of tzaddiqim that composes the communal “son of man.” Just like the twelve tribes is inclusive for the entire community of Israel and the Shekhina, as it says, “All the twelve tribes are the integral parts of the community of Israel in this world, to give full strength to the supernal light” (*Zohar I:155a*). In the same manner the twelve constellations are inclusive of the entire universe, as it says, “Twelve elementals...they are the boundaries of the universe... twelve constellations in the universe... which in the soul are twelve directors, male and female” (*sefer Yetzirah 5:1-3*). The Zohar establishes the principle that in the renewal of the world (in the Messianic era, when the world to Come intermixes with this world and the resurrection of the dead takes place), the tzaddiqim of old will become counsellors of Messiah who judges Israel with righteousness. The Zohar, therefore, says: “It has pleased the Holy One, in former time, to send down to earth those spirits and souls who belonged to the highest supernal grade. Should he not, then, in the future let the spirits of the tzaddiqim come down again when he will make the crooked straight (i.e., when he will redeem the world)? For, indeed, there is not a righteous man upon earth that does good and does not sin. And even those who did not physically sin, who only died because of the counsel of the Serpent – i.e., because of their evil inclination [cf. *Shabbat 55b*] – will arise and be counsellors to the Messiah” (*Zohar 2:54a-54b*). For about Messiah it is written: “He shall be animated by the fear of Hashem, and he will not judge with the sight of his eyes, nor with the hearing of his ears shall he chastise. He will judge the poor justly and he will chastise with equity the humble of the earth. He will smite the earth with the rod of his mouth and with the breath of his lips he shall put the wicked to death” (*Isaiah 11:2-4*).

19:29 for my sake – For the sake of my mission, which is bringing the kingdom of God (cf. *Luke 18:19*).

19:29 will receive a hundred times as much – The expression is derived from reinterpreting the verse that says, “May Hashem add to his people one hundred times more of whatsoever they may be” (*1Chronicles 21:3*).

—relevant quotes—

“A king made a banquet to which he invited guests. He said to them, Go, wash yourselves, brush up your clothes, anoint yourselves with oil, wash your garments, and prepare yourselves for the banquet. However, he fixed no time when they were to come to it. The wise among them walked about by the entrance of the king's palace, saying, Does the king's palace lack anything? The foolish among them paid no regard or attention to the king's command. They said, We will in due course notice when the king's banquet is to take place, because can there be a banquet without labour [to prepare it] and company? So the plasterer went to his plaster, the potter to his clay, the smith to his charcoal, the washer to his laundry. Suddenly the king ordered, Let them all come to the banquet. They hurried the guests, so that some came in their splendid attire and others came in their dirty garments. The king was pleased with the wise ones who had obeyed his command, and also because they had shown honour to the king's palace. He was angry with the fools who had neglected his command and disgraced his palace. The king said, 'Let those who have prepared themselves for the banquet come and eat of the king's meal, but those who have not prepared themselves shall not partake of it' (*Qohelet Rabbah 9:7*).

³⁰But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.

—commentary—

19:30 many who are first will be last – This famous saying of Yeshua, which in its oral form was probably remembered as an independent saying, was recorded by all the gospel authors, and apparently each one decided in which context to use it. In this passage the author of Mattai follows after its parallel in Mark (*Mark 10:31*), but then uses it again in the next chapter (*Matt. 20:16*) with a similar meaning. The author of Luke, though, makes a free use of the phrase in a different context (*Luke 13:30*). The Thomas' version is introspective and initiatic; it refers to the self-nullification that is required in order to experience the messianic era within, for our physical self is "the first" and "the last" is our renewed self after repentance and attachment to the Creator. Thomas portrays the first as "a man old in days" and the last as a "seven days old child." The Mark-Mattai version also makes this connection in a way that has been constantly overlooked. Notice that a few verses prior to the story of the young rich man (which is concluded with the sentence we are discussing), Yeshua says that the kingdom belongs to those who are like children (cf. *Matt. 19:13-14*). Therefore, those few scholars who throw the Thomas' version away as being simply made up are mistaken. And those who think the saying is Gnostic rather than Jewish, are simply missing the fact that the physical body (called the first and the man old in days) and the spiritual soul (called the last and the seven days old child) has its parallelism in Judaism, for the same concept is represented by Yaaqov and Eisav, where Eisav came out of his mother's belly first, and Yaaqov came later, but then Yaaqov became the first and Eisav the last. For it is written "the older will serve the younger" (*Gen. 25:23*). Now, going back to our author, the reason Mattai (and consequently also Mark) inserts the phrase "many who are first will be the last" at the end of this passage is because it serves to summarize the entire portion, which began with children being brought to Yeshua and concluded with the rich man walking away from him. Many have important positions on earth, even within the religious world, and many are those who have apparently nothing on their own, who are humble or poor. But the inheritance of the kingdom depends not on how religious you are, or how wealthy and important you think to be, but rather on your capacity to awaken the new-born child soul within, like Yaaqov did after which he became Israel. It is taught in a Talmudic story that Rabbi Yosef fell into a coma for a while and then recovered. His father (Yehoshua ben Levi) asked him, What did you see? And he replied: "I beheld a world the reverse of this one, where those who are on top here were below there, and vice versa. His father said to him, My son, you have seen a corrected world" (*Pesakhim 50a*).

—relevant quotes—

"Yeshua said, a man old in days will not hesitate to ask a small child of seven days about the place of life and he will live. For many who are first will become last, and the last will be first, and they will become one."

(Thomas #4)