THE FIRST BECOMING THE LAST: AN EXEGETICAL STUDY OF MATTHEW 19:23-30

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ABSTRACT

This study take a critical look at what the passage (Matthew 19:23-30) meant to those who first heard or read it (Vymeister 2001) by identifying the main forte of the dialogue in the passage through an exegetical process. The actual process of exegesis used include: definition of the literary unit, translation and textual problems, genre and structure, and interpretation which will take into account historical, grammatical and syntactical issues which stand out in this periscope. The issue of "the first being the last", as posited by Jesus during His discussion with the rich young man cum His disciples has been variously understood by scholars and others. What did Jesus mean when He said that it is very hard for the rich person to enter into the kingdom of heaven, accentuating this impossibility with the saying that "it is easier for the camel to go through the eye of the needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God." Using the exegetical method of inquiry, we found that the view which is common, that the rich person cannot go to heaven, was faulty. As long as the rich is willing to make the necessary sacrifices, he or she can be part of the kingdom. Besides, both the early comers to Christ and those who came later will receive the same reward. Therefore, whoever the first is, whether the disciples or the Jews, those who will later make it to the kingdom of God as the last will also be treated as the first.

INTRODUCTION

The possibility of "the first becoming the last" in many life's endeavours is often detested and usually prayed against. In fact, some people may likely reprimand anyone who suggests or insinuates that they, being the first, will eventually be the last. The concept of being the last is often linked to losing out on eternal life albeit such persons may have started worshipping God a long time ago. No one will like his or her Christian struggles to be in vain at last. Thus, the quest for eternal life has always been an important issue in biblical history and even today. The Israelites believe that though this life might end someday, those who trusted and have faith in God will partake in God's final victory which eventually is victory over death.... When this victory comes, there is no doubt that death itself will be vanquished (Dyrness, 1977). Salvation was an issue most people misunderstood among the ancient Jews.

According to Green and Mcknight (1992), people lived in fear not knowing if they are accepted into God's kingdom or rejected, or even whether salvation is in the future or

present. This was the case with the Rich young ruler. His interest in eternal life was the cause and origin of the discussion which ensued between him and Jesus Christ (Luke.18:18). The question he asked was "what good thing must I do to have eternal life?" (Matthew.19:16). And then the discussion began, from a simple stereological dialogue to a debate on the eschatos. That discussion led to the enigmatic statement of Jesus in Matthew 19:30 to His disciples. This dialogue has caused several challenges in the Christian world today, because the text is one that people have often read out of context, hence this study.

Pertinent Preliminary Issues in the Gospel of Matthew: According to Akpa (2009), "there is hardly any book in the NT whose authorship is not debated by scholars." Although modern scholarship rejects the authorship of Matthew (Pritchard 1902), textual evidences Akpa (2005), popular opinion Green and Mcknight (1992) attribute it to Matthew the disciple of Jesus Christ who was a former tax collector (Barnes 1976). Based on internal evidences however, this study assumes Matthew as the author of the gospel. On the dating, this gospel was certainly written in the first century A.D to the Jews in Palestine (McCain, 2002), though the possibility of a mixed audience (Jewish-Gentile) may not be ruled out Akpa (2005).

Matthew 19:16-30 is part of the book of Matthew chapter 19, which has 30 verses. The chapter has three major divisions: 1-12 deals with the discourse concerning marriage and divorce, 13-15- blessing of children and then 16-30-the story of the rich young ruler. This study follows the last division which will focus more on verses 23-30 which deal with the discussion between Jesus and his disciples. However, it also take into consideration the parable of Matthew 20:1-16 which seems to be an explanation to Jesus last statement in Matthew 19:30.

Genre and Structure: The genre is both a narrative and a discourse. This is because there seems to be a transformation from the earlier to the later. The structure shows something like this:

Jesus Speaks to His Disciples (23-24): From the Biblical account of the rich young ruler, it is evident that it was his turning away from Jesus' invitation in vs. 21 that led to the discussion between Jesus and His disciples. There are two significant issues in this first phase of the discussion, namely the difficulty faced by the rich in entering the kingdom (vs.23) and the proverbial statement in vs. 24. We shall examine them separately.

Difficulty faced by the rich in entering the kingdom (vs.23): The big question is: Why is it "hard for a rich man to enter into the Kingdom of God"? Nichol (1980) suggests that it is the attitude of the rich man towards riches that might cause that difficulty. God's kingdom is hard to reach for the rich because they are far more inclined to trust the security of wealth rather than God Kulikovskky (2009) citing Daivies and Alison (n.d) (Luke 12:15, 21). Matthew (1991), agreeing with Nichol's (1980) view, proposes contentment in life for Christians. He observes that since the disciples were poor, Jesus was trying to tell them that the less they had of worldly wealth, the less hindrance they had in the way to heaven." To that end, they (the disciples), who are in a lower condition should be contented with what they have than to be exposed to the temptations of a high and prosperous

condition (Henry 1991). This danger is graphically painted in 1Timothy. 6:9, 10 thus: “But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition”. “For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows”. However, in as much as contentment is virtuous, and the quest for wealth dangerous, that may not annul the fact that the rich can also enter the kingdom of God. It seems that the attitude of the rich towards their wealth that Jesus was concerned about. Wealth should not be the utmost priority of man; it should not be a bridge between man and his creator.

A proverbial statement (vs. 24): 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 (Matthew 19:24, NIV). That was the profound proverb of Jesus to illustrate the difficulty that will be experienced by the rich in entering the kingdom of God. This proverb which had an Arabian origin, and is seen in the Babylonian Talmud, was the only way Jesus could explain this difficulty to His disciples. This was so because among the Jews, it was popularly used to express extreme difficulty (Roberton, 1930; Barnes 1980). This was one of those instances when Jesus employed a hyperbole to intensify His argument.

It is ludicrous to think that a Camel can go through the eye of the needle. Although commentators have tried to find small gates or even Camel-hair to downgrade this hyperbolic statement (Albright and Mann (1971), the Bible proves otherwise. The Greek word for needle is *r`afi,doj*, this appears only twice (Matthew.19:24, Mark 10:25) in the GNT and used only in the context of this account. It literally means "needle" (UBSL2001). That the eye of a needle is a small door or that the Greek word kamlon is a clerical error for cable are later interpretations and detract from the keenness of this word http://www.elim.nl/en/theology/matthewmatthew-19.html and stating otherwise is out of this context.

The disciples' astonishment and reply (vs. 25): The astonishment of the disciples came from the backdrop that "wealth was a sign of God's blessing and poverty was a sign of God's displeasure (White 1990 and Adeyemo 2006)." Thus, if this is the issue with wealth, "Who then can be saved?" (vs. 25c) To the Jews, obedience to the law brought about prosperity (Albright and Mann 1971) therefore, a rich man must have been an ardent observer of God's law and was a favorite in God's kingdom. So if this law keeper cannot make heaven, who then will be saved? This question denotes a finality of the discussion and a subsequent negative answer. Here, Jesus proved them wrong with the proverb and introduces His statement of impossibility and possibility in the next verse.

Jesus' reply (vs. 26): Following the note of finality in the question of the disciples, Jesus made the profound statement of impossibility versus possibility in the realms of men and God respectively. How we deal with this aspect makes a lot of difference in our interpretation of the whole discourse.

Impossibility versus possibility (vs.26b-c): Brown (1968) rightly observes that "the paradox is not softened by the saying "with man, this is impossible, but with God, all this

is possible." This is one of the aforementioned enigmas of this study. The question is what are the things that are possible? Is it the rich man's entrance into the kingdom or what? An insight from the word analysis shows that it would not be out of place to state that the impossibility Jesus was referring to was the rich man going to heaven.

However, the possibility in contrast, only referred to two things: the Camel passing through the eye of the needle and the rich man entering the kingdom of God. Corroborating this thought, Brown (1988) suggests that what God makes possible is not the rich going to Heaven, but "the renunciation of wealth." Further, Clarke's Commentary (1994) observes that the salvation of the rich is represented as possible to Him" (God), and "it requires the exertions of omnipotence to save a rich man." Both are right, in that before a rich man will go to heaven, he must renounce his attitude towards wealth and follow God without reservations. Besides, "it is only the power of God operating in man's life can bring about the transformation of character requisite for entrance into the kingdom of heaven" Nchol Et al (1980).

Spurgeon (2010) sheds some useful light when he observed that our salvation, when we view our weakness and power of sin, it is impossible with men. Only when we turn to God and His grace does salvation range among the possibilities. By this, Spurgeon does not only keep the rich in view, but all men, thereby reestablishing the fact that salvation is needed by all. Therefore, contrary to the world view of the Jews and that of His disciples, Jesus in making this statement was probably trying to imply the following:

1. It is impossible for the rich to get to heaven on the basis of human effort Nicol et al 1980).
2. It is only God, through His grace, who makes salvation possible.
3. It is erroneous to use humanistic yard stick to measure salvation.
4. Salvation is a heavenly decision.
5. There is therefore danger in using humanistic yard stick to measure a heavenly decision.

Peter's Comment (vs. 27): Peter's comment was prompted by the last statement of Jesus. If the rich man who was supposed to be heaven's favourite had circumstantially rejected heaven (by not sacrificing his wealth and riches) then what about them (the disciples), the poor ones who have forsaken or left everything to follow Jesus? Although critics (Robertson 1930) have suggested that Peter's comment was "an unnecessary and rather self-complacent (Tasker 1961)" question, Jesus does not sideline that question.

The Disciples Denial versus Their Reward: It seems that Peter the supposed spokesman for the disciples, was counting what they have sacrificed and denied themselves their cost. White (1990). proposes that it was the conditional reward that Jesus spoke of in vs. 21 Jesus answered, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." That prompted this question White (1990). Although, they had denied the "world" by following Jesus, had forsaken their fishing jobs to become fishers of men for the gospel (Matthew 4:18-22), what will be their reward now especially as those who have sacrificed everything, unlike the rich young man who just left? Their denial could also be compared to what Paul said in Philippians

3:7-8 "But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish that I may gain Christ" (NIV). Here, gaining Christ could also be seen as gaining eternal life/salvation by following Christ.

Jesus answer to the disciples (vs. 28-30): With the question of Peter on what their reward will be. Jesus answers him without any form of sarcasm; He spells out the reward for the disciples for their denial, a reward for every other person and makes the most enigmatic statement which has been the focus of this study. This section is divided into three sections, namely: (a). Reward for the Disciples vs.28b-d (b) reward for others vs. 29 and (c) first will be last vs. 30.

Reward for the Disciples (vs.28b-d): Here Jesus spells out a very significant reward which is only made to the disciples. He starts by stating that when He (the Son on man) sits on the throne, or "comes in the cloud of His Glory", the disciples will "sit on twelve thrones." Burkitt (2004) suggests that to sit on a throne denotes power and honour; and means here that they should be distinguished above others, and be more highly honoured and rewarded (Bukitt, 2004)." Meier (1997) thinks otherwise. He asserts that the twelve who will sit will be those who will judge "eschatological Israel". To Meier, that time of Judgment will be a time when Christ would come back when hope for regathering and reconsisting the tribes of Israel is achieved. By that promise to the twelve, Jesus reflected His mission to all Israel by creating a 'group called the twelve, whose very number symbolized, promised and began the regathering of the twelve tribes." The twelve were to be His inner circle who will share in the governance of the Kingdom. They will also judge the twelve tribes of Israel. Although there is need for further study on this section, judging twelve thrones could suggest "judging the twelve tribes of Israel; not authoritatively, for the final sentence belongs to Christ alone, but cooperating with him in his decisions (Family Bible Notes, 2004)."

Reward for Every Other Person (vs. 29): Continuing His response, Jesus brings every other person who has denied or will deny the world, brother, sister, mother, father, houses, children or fields, to receive a hundred times more, and then to eventually inherit eternal life. This of course includes the disciples whom had already done their own part of the denial.

The First Will Be Last and Vice Versa (vs. 30): One question scholars have grappled with is how to determine who the first were and who the last will be. While some say that at "the end of everything", the rich will become poor and the poor will become rich. Others think that the first refers to the Jews and the last refers to the Gentiles. Another group posits that the "proverb assumes that the disciples had been arguing about priority on the basis of who was first called, to which Jesus" proves wrong by saying that the first will be the last and the last, first. Further,Gaebelein and Douglas (1984) suggest that "those who approach God in childlike trust will be advanced in the kingdom beyond those who, from the world's perspective, enjoy prominence now. Lenski (1943) on the other hand infers that many who at first were in the kingdom will finally be out of it; while many who at first were out of it will at last be in it".

In searching for the best interpretation of this text, a look at the original language is very necessary. From a word study aspect, it will be noticed that the words used to signify first and last are *prw/toi* and *e;scatoi* respectively, and are similar in case and usage. If this is so, then this statement (the first shall be the last and the last, first) is used to show equality to those who come to God's kingdom at any time.

This is actually demonstrated in the parable of the workers in the vineyard in Matthew 20:1-16. It is quite glaring that all workers received the same amount of wages. (a denarius for a day). If the land owner contracted some labourers in the morning and at different hours of the day (the third, sixth to the ninth hour) and decided to pay them "whatever is right" The land owner agreed with the first set of people to pay them a denarius for the day's job, and whatever is right to the rest which were contacted at different hours of the day, even till the last hour; and eventually paid all of them a denarius for the reward of their labour, then, it is convincing to believe that he took all of them as equals. He judged them to be on the same level no matter who came first or last, everyone is equal and will receive the same reward the others received whether first or last.

Although the text has a dualistic interpretation of who the first was, interpreting the disciples as the first is a possibility. π o l l o i which is in the nominative case is used to name a specific group. This is so for the singular fact that they (the disciples) were Jesus' immediate audience at the time the statement was made according to the context. Jesus had told them about their reward in the kingdom for their life of self abnegation and also extended it to every other person. He sums by saying that the incredible inheritance of eternal life which is the most important gift will be given to not only the disciples but also to every other person who will make such a sacrifice. From the text, it is evident that the disciples were the first to make this denial and Jesus was using this statement to warn them that inasmuch as they were the first to make this denial and also follow Him, those who will eventually make such denial at last, no matter the time, will also receive the same reward as those who were first. That is why He used the parable to interpret that statement: the first shall be the last, and the last first. On a more general sense, the first could also be seen as the Jews-Israel who followed God and were called His people.

CONCLUSION

The discourse of Jesus in Matthew 19:23-30 and the matters arising from them formed the heart of this paper. It dealt with the rich young ruler, his quest for eternal life, Christ's response, the question of the disciples about His answer and His final summative response. From all of that, the following points seem to stand out. First, Jesus wanted the rich young man to follow Him. By selling all he had and giving it to the poor (Matt. 19: 21), the rich man would have made denials especially of riches and eventually of this world. Second, the disciples sacrificed and denied this world even to the extent of leaving family members to follow Jesus and become fishers of men (working for Jesus to gain other souls).

Third, what the disciples did could be compared to working in the vineyard which the rich man refused to do. Fourth, the rich man, disciples and every other person who

will make denials and follow Christ were and are promised eternal life. Fifth, the first in the kingdom of God is equal to the last in the kingdom. Lastly, whoever the first is, whether the disciples or the Jews, those who will later make it to the kingdom of God as the last will also be treated as the first.

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