

Some of the sayings of Jesus are so strong that we wonder if Jesus really wants us to take them literally. Should we really pluck out our eye if it causes us to sin? Is it really better to be drowned with a millstone than to lead a little one astray? Is it really easier for a camel to go through a needle's eye than a rich man to enter the kingdom of God? Jesus' overstatements make us uncomfortable when we aren't sure how we should take them.

Ridiculous overstatement

pluck out an eye

Drowned

Camel thru needle's eye

Action

if eye causes sin

lead one astray

rich man enter KOG

We should keep in mind is that Jesus and His contemporaries often used exaggeration, and gave commands that went far beyond expectations, in order to underline the importance of what they taught. For instance, a Rabbinic Teaching is: *When three eat at one table and words of Torah are not spoken there, it is as if they ate at the altars of the dead... But when three eat at one table and bring up words of Torah, it is as if they ate from the table of God, blessed be He!*

The point of this teaching is to emphasize that people should try to always include discussion of the scriptures when they eat together. Likening a meal without Bible study to worshipping in an idolatrous temple is a strong overstatement that is intended for emphasis.

Another example:

*Let no one stand for prayer without bowing his head... Even if the king greets you, do not answer him. And even if a snake is coiled at your heel, do not break it off.*

Once again the importance of concentration in prayer is taught by exaggeration – by saying that even in the most extreme circumstances, you should have single-minded attention on God. People took these teachings seriously, but knew they were overstatements for effect.

Knowing this aspect of Jesus' culture should give us some sense of how Jesus' words were heard by his audience when he said things like, *"I tell you the truth, if you have faith and do not doubt...you can say to this mountain, "Go, throw yourself into the sea," and it will be done."* (Matt 21:21). He sounded like many other rabbis who said extreme things to reinforce the importance of their teaching. We must be careful not to minimize Jesus' intent to a higher value just as exaggeration. But our

ability to interpret his exaggerated words increases our understanding of the importance of the teaching.

It may surprise many that Jesus' teachings are filled with "hints" to the scriptures. He often used unique phrases or even single words to allude to passages in the Old Testament. He could do this because He lived in a biblically literate culture, where most people knew much of the Old Testament scriptures by memory. By knowing His reference, people recognize the context and heard more complex ideas of the Scriptures behind just His words. He wasn't hiding secret messages – He expected people to catch his allusions. In medieval times the Jews referred to this technique of hinting as *"remez"*, but the practice actually predated Jesus.

One example of this is when at the cleansing of the temple, Jesus said, *"My house is to be a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of thieves!"* (Matt 21:13) He was quoting Isaiah 56:6 and Jeremiah 7:11. This contrasts God's greatest vision for the temple (All the nations of the world worshipping there) with the worst possible abuse of it (being used as a refuge for thieves and murderers, which ultimately led to its destruction). He was not just protesting the selling of doves – he was speaking about the corrupt leadership that was getting rich from temple sacrifices, and hinting about the Temple's destruction.

Another example of this practice is the conversation Jesus had with John's disciples about whether he was the *"one who was to come,"*

*When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples to ask him, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?" Jesus replied, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me."* (Mat 11:2-6)

Both John's question and Jesus' answer are filled with allusions to the scriptures. John was speaking of the *"coming one"* of Malachi 3:2, and Jesus' answer was from Isaiah 35:4-6 and 61:1 that speak about the coming of the messiah. Recognizing that all those things Jesus mentioned were fulfillment of scripture underlined that he was the fulfillment of all of those prophecies.

Knowing more about how Jesus taught should both clarify our reading and challenge us to take a closer look at Jesus' words in light of the Old Testament scriptures (Torah) and Jewish culture of the time.