

Strain AT a gnat Matthew 23:24

"Ye blind guides, which strain AT a gnat, and swallow a camel."

There are many who criticize the King James Bible reading of "strain at a gnat". Some confidently tell us this is a printing error. Yet I would ask, How do they know this? It is mere assumption on their part. Others have had no difficulty at all with the translation of "strain AT a gnat".

The word "to strain" (diulizo) is found only once in the New Testament. How to translate this word is a matter of perspective. There are at least two different ways to look at the verse as it stands in the King James Bible, and both make sense.

#1. The rendering of "strain at" a gnat, implies only the effort to try to strain out the gnats that might ceremoniously defile their drink and food; it does not necessarily mean they succeeded in always getting them out. The modern versions like the NKJV, NASB, NIV, and even the older English versions of Tyndale and Geneva say "strain OUT a gnat", as though they accomplished what they intended.

In 1729 Daniel Mace made a translation of the New Testament, and in Matthew 23:24 he translated as: "strain..FOR a gnat". This may well be the meaning that can be seen in the Authorized Version.

Likewise Lamsa's 1936 translation of the Syriac Peshitta gives a similar meaning to Matthew 23:24 saying: "O blind guides, who strain AT gnats and swallow camels."

There is nothing wrong with the KJB reading of "strain at a gnat." Other commentators in the past have had no problem with the way the phrase stands in the King James Bible.

The Baptist commentator, John Gill, writes concerning this verse: "To this practice Christ alluded here; and so very strict and careful were they in this matter, that to strain AT (caps mine) a gnat, and swallow a camel, became at length a proverb, to signify much solicitude about little things, and none about greater. These men would not, on any consideration, be guilty of such a crime, as not to pay the tithe of mint, anise, and cummin, and such like herbs and seeds; and yet made no conscience of doing justice, and showing mercy to men, or of exercising faith in God, or love to him. Just as many hypocrites, like them, make a great stir, and would appear very conscientious and scrupulous, about some little trifling things, and yet stick not, at other times, to commit the grossest enormities, and most scandalous sins in life.

Matthew Henry also comments: "they strained AT a gnat, and swallowed a camel. In their doctrine they strained AT gnats, warned people against every the least violation of the tradition of the elders. In their practice they strained AT gnats, heaved AT them, with a seeming dread, as if they had a great abhorrence of sin, and were afraid of it in the least instance"

These two commentators do not try to change the reading found in the King James Bible. They affirm that the Pharisees had a great outward revulsion for minor sins, yet they swallowed a

camel. How many gnats do you suppose were on that camel they swallowed?

Since initially writing this article, brother Steven Avery (a strong King James Bible believer and diligent researcher) has found a couple of early church father commentaries that appear to support the reading as found in the King James Bible. Here they are with their links provided. I have capitalized the little word AT in their use of the phrase "strain AT a gnat".

If you want to have a little fun, look at this translation of Chrysostom (c 400 AD) by Schaff (not KJB at all).

<http://www.tertullian.org/fathers2/NPNF1-10/npnf1-10-79.htm> Homily LXXIII of Matthew

"Then, to show that there is no harm arising from despising bodily cleansings, but very great vengeance from not regarding the purifications of the soul, which is virtue, He called these "a gnat," for they are small and nothing, but those other a camel, for they were beyond what men could bear. Wherefore also He saith, "Straining AT the gnat, and swallowing the camel." (end of quote)

<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf110.iii.XXIII.html> Homily XXIII.

"For although His disciples had been guilty of no such sin, yet in them were supposed to be offenses; as, for instance, not keeping the sabbath, eating with unwashed hands, sitting at meat with publicans; of which He saith also in another place, "Ye which strain AT the gnat, and swallow the camel." But yet it is also a general law that He is laying down on these matters."(end of quote)

In his ongoing research into numerous King James Bible readings, Steven Avery also found these early English preaching references to the phrase "strain AT a gnat."

ENGLISH USAGE BEFORE AND CONTEMPORANEOUS TO 1611

'Strain at' was in common English usage at the time immediately before the King James Bible was published, thus proving that this phrase is an accurate translation of the Greek text and not a mere printing error as the anti-KJB folks claim. One quote is from a translation of John Calvin to English and another is from one of the King James Bible translators himself.

John Whitgift - A godlie sermon preched before the Queenes Maiestie... (1574) "...ye straine AT a Gnat, & swallow..."

John Calvin translated by Arthur Golding - The sermons of M. Iohn Caluin... (1577) "...play the hipocrytes, who will streyne AT a gnat, and swallowe..."

John King - Lectures vpon Ionas deliuered at Yorke... (1599) "...wonders of nature, when we straine AT gnats, & cannot conceiue..." "They have verified the olde proverbe in strayingn AT gnats and swallowing downe camells."

George Abbot (1562–1633) - ***translator Second Oxford committee - assigned the Gospels An exposition vpon the prophet Ionah... (1600) "...to make a strayingn at a gnat, and to swallow vp a whole Camel."

Roger Fenton - ***translator - 2nd Westminster company An ansvvere to VVilliam Alablaster... (1599) "...Let vs then leaue to straine AT gnattes, and ingenuously acknowledge..."

John Whitgift (c. 1530–1604) Archbishop of Canterbury 1583-1604 (Works of John Whitgift) "...ye straine AT a Gnat, & swallow up a camel" (p. 581) Sermon 1574 " and strain AT a gnat swallowing down a camel" (p. 523) Sermon 1583 - "...of whom Christ speaketh : ' They strain AT a gnat, and swallow a camel.' "(p. 595)

Henry Barrow and John Greenwood to Puritan compromisers (1587) "strain AT a gnat and swallow a camel; and are close hypocrites, and walk in a left-handed policy"

Rudolf Gwalther An hundred, threescore and fiftene homelyes or sermons...(1572) "...Gospel, where he sayth they strayne AT a Gnat..."

Edward Topsell The house-holder: or, Perfect man. Preached in three sermons... (1610) "...will leaue these Fooles, Which straine AT Gnats, and swallow Camels ... "

Thomas Gainsford - The vision and discourse of Henry the seuenth... (1610) "...and seeke extremities, They straine AT Gnats..."

GREENE Mamillia II. B3b, 1583 - Most vniustly straining AT a gnat, and letting passe an elephant.

And this is covered in some extra depth at: <http://tinyurl.com/63q7dj> Dictionary of Christianity by Jean C. Cooper where Mamillia is given as evidence of established usage at the time.

Here is another book that examines the life of Erasmus and uses the phrase "strain AT a gnat".

<http://www.archive.org/stream/erasmusastudyofh013578mbp> Erasmus A Study Of His Life Ideals And Place In History - Preserved Smith - p. 298

Meantime Erasmus was busy defending his work against other critics. ... It is nonsense to say that he has ridiculed religion. As for the charge of lasciviousness in the dialogue between the youth and the harlot, he answers that the critics who strain AT his gnat swallow the camels of Plautus and Pogglo.

We also have one of the few actual discussions of this phrase's history:

<http://www.downtoothers.org/curious42507-4.html> to strain AT a gnat and swallow a camel

TO MAKE A FUSS OVER TRIFLES BUT ACCEPT GREAT FAULTS WITHOUT COMPLAINT. "This, as are many others, is a Biblical expression. It is found in Matthew xxiii, 24-26 : "Ye blind guides, which strain AT a gnat and swallow a camel. Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye make clean the outside of the cup and of the platter, but within they are full of extortion and excess . Thou blind Pharisee, cleanse first that which is within the cup and platter, that the outside of them may be clean also." BUT THE TRANSLATORS OF THE KING JAMES BIBLE OF 1611 WERE ALREADY FAMILIAR WITH THIS FIGURE OF SPEECH. IT APPEARED IN LECTURES UPON JONAS BY BISHOP JOHN KING, FIRST PRINTED IN 1594, reprinted in 1599, in which the bishop himself said, "They have verified the olde proverbe in straying AT gnats and swallowing downe camells." (end of article)

And we also have another modern day dictionary of phrases article that affirms the truth of the King James Bible reading of "strain AT a gnat" here:

<http://tinyurl.com/6bv65> The Wordsworth Dictionary of Phrase and Fable - by Ebenezer

Cobham Brewer (2000)

"To strain AT a gnat and swallow a camel." --- "To make much fuss about little peccadilloes, but commit offenses of real magnitude .. the Authorized Version rendering (to strain at) was in use well before the date of its issue (1611), so the 'AT' IS NOT-- AS HAS BEEN SOMETIMES STATED -- A MISPRINT OR MISTAKE FOR 'OUT'. (Caps are mine) Greene in his Maxmilla (1583) speaks of "straining at a gnat and letting pass an elephant". It means, to strain the wine at finding a gnat in it, but was early taken to stand for to swallow with considerable effort, imposing a strain on one's throat." (end of article quotes)

<http://www.downtoothers.org/curious42507-4.html> Heavens to Betsy ! & Other Curious Sayings - Charles Earl Funk (1955)

to strain at a gnat and swallow a camel

(Charles Earle Funk was editor in chief of the Funk & Wagnalls Standard Dictionary Series.)

TO MAKE A FUSS OVER TRIFLES BUT ACCEPT GREAT FAULTS WITHOUT COMPLAINT. This, as are many others, is a Biblical expression. It is found in Matthew xxiii, 24-26 : "Ye blind guides, which strain AT a gnat and swallow a camel. Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye make clean the outside of the cup and of the platter, but within they are full of extortion and excess . Thou blind Pharisee, cleanse first that which is within the cup and platter, that the outside of them may be clean also." But the translators of the King James Bible of 1611 were already familiar with this figure of speech. It had appeared in Lectures upon Jonas by Bishop John King, first printed in 1594, reprinted in 1599, in which the bishop himself said, "They have verified the olde proverbe in straying AT gnats and swallowing downe camells."

#2 Another way to look at this verse was suggested at a Bible club I belong to. It makes a lot of sense. This brother said that since the word gnat is in the singular and not the plural, the idea is that the Pharisees would strain AT a gnat, which is among the smallest of creatures, in the sense of "at discovering a gnat" or "at finding a gnat in their drink", they would begin the process of straining.

He pointed out the following. "The KJV is speaking of the pharisitical practice of straining wine after a gnat is found in it - hence, straining at (the discovered presence of) a gnat.

What is the problem with the text as it stands in Matthew 23:24? We all understand what it means to 'jump AT the crack of a whip' , 'to fight AT the drop of a hat', or be 'shocked AT his behavior' or 'get up AT the crack of dawn'. What is the problem? The gnat strainers of Matthew 23, like today's "No bible is inspired or inerrant" Bible Agnostics, begin to strain 'AT a gnat'; that is, they start to strain when the gnat shows up.

This material is taken from A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature, Third Edition (BDAG), Revised and Edited by Frederick William Danker, based on Walter Bauer's Griechisch-deutsches Worterbuch zu den Schriften des Neuen Testaments und der fruhchristlichen Literatur, sixth edition, ed. Kurt Aland and Barbara Aland,

with Viktor Reichmann and on previous English editions by W.F.Arndt, F.W. Gingrich, and F.W. Danker; Copyright 1957; 1979; 2000; The University of Chicago Press- Chicago and London; page 252:

"diulizo (in fig. sense in Pseudo-Archytas [c. 360 BC; Stob. III/1, p.58, 7 H.]In lit. mng., of wine Plut., Mor. 692d; Diosc. 2, 86; 5, 72; Artem. 4, 48; POxy 413, 154; Am 6:6) filter out, strain out fr. a liquid (the KJV 'strain at' is widely considered a misprint [so Goodsp., Relig. in Life 12, '42/43, 205-10 and Probs. '45, 38f], but for the view that it is an archaic usage s. OED s.v. 'strain,' verb, 14e and esp. 21, and CHopf, Rev. of Engl. Studies 20, '44, 155f; 'STRAIN AT' = STRAIN [the liquid] AT [seeing] a gnat; ton konopa a gnat fr. a drink Mt 23:24.--- DELG s.v. hule."

James Murray's Oxford English Dictionary, Vol. S, under "Strain," also lists the reading of "strain AT a gnat" and affirms that it was NOT a mistranslation in the King James Bible, but a legitimate and accurate translation of the Greek text. --- def. 21 (1933): "to strain at: to make a difficulty of swallowing' or accepting (something); to scruple at. Also (rarely), to strain to do something. This use is due to misunderstanding of the phrase strain at a gnat' in Matt. xxiii. 24. It has been asserted that 'straine at' in the Bible of 1611 is a misprint for 'straine out', the rendering of earlier versions (see 14e). But quotes. 1583 and 1594 show that the translators of 1611 simply adopted a rendering that had already obtained currency. IT WAS NOT A MISTRANSLATION, THE MEANING INTENDED BEING 'WHICH STRAIN THE LIQUOR IF THEY FIND A GNAT IN IT'. (Caps are mine) The phrase, however, was early misapprehended (perh. already by Shakes. in quot. 1609), the verb being supposed to mean to make violent effort."

When a gnat was found in wine, of course it was removed by hand. Insects aren't kosher, though some locusts are. What, according to Jewish law, allowed the remaining wine to be kosher was straining it, just in case any more impurities might be found in it. If you couldn't strain it, ALL the wine was to be thrown away. So - they strained AT the discovery of a gnat, which may or may not strain additional gnats.

The 1983 edition of the Chambers Dictionary, which was then known as the Chambers 20th Century Dictionary, contains the following entry, under the headword 'strain' - strain at in Matt. xxiii. 24, to remove by straining, strain IN THE EVENT OF FINDING."

I understand many KJV opponents love this "error", but in my opinion, the only error here is with their understanding of the English language and of Jewish law.

This construction in English is very clear to me and to the editors of what is arguably the utmost authority on the English language, the Oxford English Dictionary. Jews strained when an insect was found - that is, at (the discovery of) a gnat. Far from being an error, the King James Bible has the best translation which fits all the facts.

I find it highly inconsistent of those who promote the multiple-choice "No bible is inerrant" modern versions, that they will focus in on this single word "at" in the King James Bible, and criticize it as being wrong, all the while committing the very thing this verse is talking about, by swallowing a camel.

For the moment, this minute and debatable difference in meaning of this single two letter word "at" in the phrase "strain at a gnat" seems to have taken on great importance for the King James Bible critic. He shouts to high heaven that it is either a printing error or else a faulty translation in the KJB, but when other far more weightier textual problems are found in his favorite modern versions that don't even agree among themselves, then he goes right back to the same old argument: "Well, the General Message is the same in all versions, and it doesn't really matter which bible you use."

Here are just a few of the more significant textual inconsistencies found in this same chapter of Matthew 23.

In Matthew 23:4 we read: "For they bind heavy burdens AND GRIEVOUS TO BE BORNE, and lay them on men's shoulders."

The reading "and grievous to be borne", (kai dusbastakta) is found in the vast Majority of all manuscripts including Vaticanus. It is also the reading found in the Revised Version of 1881 and in the ASV of 1901. Even the Revised Standard Version and the NRSV continued to include this reading of "and grievous to be borne".

What is curious is how "scholarly" the guys who put together today's multiple-choice bible versions really are. When Westcott and Hort first came out with their wildly revised new Greek text in 1881, they omitted the words "and grievous to be borne" from their text. However, not even the Revised Version nor the American Standard Version followed their very own W.H. texts, but instead included these words as they had previously stood in all English Bibles.

THEN, later on when the UBS and Nestle-Aland critical Greek texts once again added these words to their critical Greek texts, THIS TIME the NASB and NIV decided not to follow their own Greek texts, but instead now omitted this reading! Go figure.

Solely on the basis of one manuscript, Sinaiticus, the NASB and the NIV chose to omit these inspired words. The ever-changing Nestle-Aland, UBS critical texts now include these words in their Greek texts, and many other modern versions still include these words which the NASB and NIV omit.

The words "and grievous to be borne" are found in the 2001 ESV, the brand new International Standard Version, the Holman Standard, NKJV, Hebrew Names Bible, the Complete Jewish Bible, and now the TNIV has gone and put these words back into their text. I guess the old NIV is now "out of date".

In Matthew 23:5 we read: "...they make broad their phylacteries, and enlarge the borders OF THEIR GARMENTS." (twn himatiwn). These words are found in the Majority of all texts and in the NIV, NKJV, Revised Version, Hebrew Names Version, Complete Jewish Bible, and the TNIV. The NASB puts them in italics, but the RSV, NRSV, ESV and Holman Standard omit these words because they are not found in Sinaiticus or Vaticanus.

Matthew 23:8 "But be ye not called Rabbi: for one is your Master, EVEN CHRIST; and all ye are brethren."

Here the word "Christ" is again found in the vast majority of all Greek texts, including the Syriac Peshitta, the Old Latin, the Spanish Reina Valera, NKJV, Hebrew Names Version and the Complete Jewish Bible.

But versions like the NASB, NIV, ESV, and Holman Standard all omit it, primarily because the word "Christ" is not found in Sinaiticus and Vaticanus. But even here these two "oldest and best" manuscripts do not completely agree with each other in this single verse.

In Matthew 23:14 the ENTIRE VERSE is omitted in such versions as the RV, ASV, RSV, ESV, NIV and the TNIV.

The verse reads: "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye devour widows' houses, and for a pretence make long prayer: therefore ye shall receive the greater damnation."

This entire verse is found in the majority of all Greek manuscripts including the Syriac Peshitta, the Old Latin, Spanish Reina Valera, the NKJV, Tyndale, Coverdale, Bishops' bible, the Geneva Bible, the Modern Greek N.T. used throughout the Greek Orthodox church, the Hebrew Names Version and the Complete Jewish Bible.

The NASB, the International Standard Version and the Holman Standard all place the verse in the text but within brackets. Is it or is it not inspired Scripture? The modern versions can't seem to agree with each other even regarding a whole verse in one chapter of Matthew, and there are many more whole verses in the New Testament where they are all in disagreement - anywhere from 17 to 45 entire verses.

Two more little examples of how the modern versions treat just one single word are found in verses 19 and 38 of this same chapter. In 23:19 we read: "YE FOOLS AND blind: for whether is greater, the gift, or the altar that sanctifieth the gift?".

Here the words "fools and" are found in the majority of all texts INCLUDING Vaticanus, and the Spanish Reina Valera, NKJV, Geneva, Tyndale, KJB, Syriac Peshitta, Old Latin, Hebrew Names Version and the modern Complete Jewish Bible. BUT versions like the NASB, NIV, RSV, ESV and Holman all omit these words, because not found in Sinaiticus.

Then in verse Matthew 23: 38 we read: "Behold, your house is left unto you DESOLATE (ereemos). This little word "desolate" is found in the Majority of all Greek texts, including Sinaiticus, and many ancient versions of the bible.

However Vaticanus omits this word from its text and so did Wescott and Hort. Yet, in spite of the fact that WH text omitted the word, the RV and ASV continued to read as does the KJB and included the word. Lately, once again the Nestle-Aland, UBS Greek critical texts upon which most modern versions are based, have decided to put the word "desolate" back into their ever-changing Greek texts, but in [brackets], indicating doubt as to its authenticity. Versions like the NASB, NIV, RSV, ESV, and Holman continue to include the word "desolate", but so we won't get too confident that we really have the inspired words of God, versions like the NASB and RSV tell us in their footnote that "some manuscripts omit 'desolate'."

When some of these gross inconsistencies are pointed out to the X Files bible promoters (the

Truth is Out There somewhere), then they retreat from their previous stand of attacking the King James Bible for one little word, and now revert to telling us that it doesn't really matter which bible versions we use because they all somehow have the same "message" even though they differ from one another in thousands of words, and the meanings of hundreds of other verses are changed.

It's a funny world, isn't it?

Extra Notes: The following is a criticism posted at Fighting Fundamental Forum by a man who has admitted that he does not believe there is such a thing as the perfect words of God in any Bible in any language. I then address his remarks.

Originally Posted by freesundayschoollessons [QUOTE] The KJVO would like us to think that maintaining the preposition "at" suggests that they alone are loyal to God's Word. In fact, as we have seen, from this thread and BibleProtector's thread, they prefer extra biblical materials to a near exclusion, if not total exclusion of, a contextually-sensitive biblical exposition.[/QUOTE]

My Response to his criticism:

free, We Bible believers (the inerrant Scriptures are the King James Holy Bible and nothing else in book form) are not the ones who initially bring up this silly discussion of yours about a single preposition being either "at" or "out". It is you guys who do not believe in the inerrancy of Scripture who always bring it up like you have finally found some tiny little error in the HOLY BIBLE, and can now destroy or undermine the Absolute Authority of the Written Words of God. It is only then that the King James Bible believer begins to demonstrate that your whole "error" or "printing error" is a mere myth and that the phrase "strain AT a gnat" has been used many times in history both before and after the King James Bible was published.

Several learned men also made translations of earlier Greek and Latin authors and came up with "strain AT a gnat", and had no problem with it. Widely recognized Bible commentators like John Gill and Matthew Henry also used the phrase "strain AT a gnat" and expounded upon it without making any change in the text.

Other versions that agree with the KJB reading are both Mace's New Testament translation done in the early 1700's, and Lamsa's translation of the Syriac Peshitta.

Then we have the latest BDAG lexicon and the Oxford English Dictionary, both of which allow for the reading of "strain AT a gnat".

On your side all we have is your own opinions and personal preferences, and the hubris to think that you and you alone are the final authority on what God may or may not have said or intended. And all this coming from a man who does not believe any Bible in any language is the complete, authoritative, inspired and inerrant words of God.

You hypocritically refer to "the Bible first" when in fact you are not referring to anything that actually exists according to your own admissions. You are piously professing a faith in something that even you deny exists. Now how is that for messed up thinking?!?

If other people actually think you know what your are talking about and want to follow your self-

contradictory and delusional ways, then let them. They will probably end up like Bart Ehrman did. He was on the same trail as you are now. At least he was honest enough to be consistent in his thinking.

Bart Ehrman - Down the Road to Apostasy

<http://www.geocities.com/brandplucked/Misquote.html>

"He that hath ears to hear, let him hear."

Will Kinney