The Greek word *mulos* refers to “a mill” or “a millstone.” According to BDAG, a mill was made of two flat stones, which varied in the course of time and provenance in size and shape. By moving one over the other, whether by hand or some mechanical contrivance, grain was crushed between the stones, and thus turned into flour. The great millstone of Matthew 18:6 refers, not to a stone from the small handmill, but rather to a large millstone, worked by donkey-power.

Lowly slaves usually performed the work of grinding grain (Exod. 11:4-5; Isa. 47:1-3; Lam. 5:1-2, 12-13). In addition to grinding natural grains, millstones were also used to process manna, which was similar to coriander seed (Num. 11:7-9; Exod. 16:31). Because bread was essential to one’s survival, a millstone could not be taken in pledge (Deut. 24:6).

*Exodus 11:4-5* ... 4 Moses said, “Thus says the Lord, ‘About midnight I am going out into the midst of Egypt, 5 and all the firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die, from the firstborn of the Pharaoh who sits on his throne, even to the firstborn of the slave girl who is behind the millstones; all the firstborn of the cattle as well.’ (NASB95)

*Isaiah 47:1-3* ... 1 “Come down and sit in the dust, O virgin daughter of Babylon; Sit on the ground without a throne, O daughter of the Chaldeans! For you shall no longer be called tender and delicate. 2 “Take the millstones and grind meal. Remove your veil, strip off the skirt, Uncover the leg, cross the rivers. 3 “Your nakedness will be uncovered, Your shame also will be exposed; I will take vengeance and will not spare a man.” (NASB95)

*Lamentations 5:1-2* ... 1 Remember, O Lord, what has befallen us; Look, and see our reproach! 2 Our inheritance has been turned over to strangers, Our houses to aliens. (NASB95)

*Lamentations 5:12-13* ... 12 Princes were hung by their hands; Elders were not respected. 13 Young men worked at the grinding mill, And youths stumbled under loads of wood. (NASB95)

*Numbers 11:7-9* ... 7 Now the manna was like coriander seed, and its appearance like that of bdellium. 8 The people would go about and gather it and grind it between two millstones or beat it in the mortar, and boil it in the pot and make cakes with it; and its taste was as the taste of cakes baked with oil. 9 When the dew fell on the camp at night, the manna would fall with it. (NASB95)
Exodus 16:31 ... 31 The house of Israel named it manna, and it was like coriander seed, white, and its taste was like wafers with honey. (NASB95)

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Deuteronomy 24:6 ... 6 “No one shall take a handmill or an upper millstone in pledge, for he would be taking a life in pledge. (NASB95)

Symbolism is frequently employed. Demonstrating God’s great power, Leviathan’s scales are impenetrable, and his heart is as hard as a lower millstone (Job 41:1, 15, 24). Mills/millstones are also descriptive of the deteriorations of advancing age, representing the loss of teeth, “the grinding ones stand idle because they are few,” and also of hearing, “the doors on the street are shut as the sound of the grinding mill is low” (Eccl. 12:3-4).

Job 41:1 ... 1 “Can you draw out Leviathan with a fishhook? Or press down his tongue with a cord? (NASB95)

Job 41:15 ... 15 “His strong scales are his pride, Shut up as with a tight seal. (NASB95)

Job 41:24 ... 24 “His heart is as hard as a stone, Even as hard as a lower millstone. (NASB95)

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Ecclesiastes 12:3-4 ... 3 in the day that the watchmen of the house tremble, and mighty men stoop, the grinding ones stand idle because they are few, and those who look through windows grow dim; 4 and the doors on the street are shut as the sound of the grinding mill is low, and one will arise at the sound of the bird, and all the daughters of song will sing softly. (NASB95)

Their weight was significant. Abimelech, son of Gideon and ruler of Shechem, was fatally injured while attacking the stronghold of Thebez when a woman dropped a millstone on his head, thus crushing his skull (Judg. 9:50-57; cf. 2 Sam. 11:14-21).

Judges 9:50-57 ... 50 Then Abimelech went to Thebez, and he camped against Thebez and captured it. 51 But there was a strong tower in the center of the city, and all the men and women with all the leaders of the city fled there and shut themselves in; and they went up on the roof of the tower. 52 So Abimelech came to the tower and fought against it, and approached the entrance of the tower to burn it with fire. 53 But a certain woman threw an upper millstone on Abimelech’s head, crushing his skull. 54 Then he called quickly to the young man, his armor bearer, and said to him, “Draw your sword and kill me, so that it will not be said of me, ‘A woman slew him.’ ” So the young man pierced him through, and he died. 55 When the men of Israel saw that Abimelech was dead, each departed to his home. 56 Thus God repaid the wickedness of Abimelech, which he had done to his father in killing his seventy brothers. 57 Also God returned all the wickedness of the men of Shechem on their heads, and the curse of Jotham the son of Jerubbaal came upon them. (NASB95)
2 Samuel 11:14-21 ... 14 Now in the morning David wrote a letter to Joab and sent it by the hand of Uriah. 15 He had written in the letter, saying, “Place Uriah in the front line of the fiercest battle and withdraw from him, so that he may be struck down and die.” 16 So it was as Joab kept watch on the city, that he put Uriah at the place where he knew there were valiant men. 17 The men of the city went out and fought against Joab, and some of the people among David’s servants fell; and Uriah the Hittite also died. 18 Then Joab sent and reported to David all the events of the war. 19 He charged the messenger, saying, “When you have finished telling all the events of the war to the king, 20 and if it happens that the king’s wrath rises and he says to you, ‘Why did you go so near to the city to fight? Did you not know that they would shoot from the wall? 21 ‘Who struck down Abimelech the son of Jerubbesheth? Did not a woman throw an upper millstone on him from the wall so that he died at Thebez? Why did you go so near the wall?’—then you shall say, ‘Your servant Uriah the Hittite is dead also.’” (NASB95)

In like manner, millstones are also used as a symbol of certain and severe judgment (Matt. 18:1-6; Mark 9:42; Luke 17:1-2; Rev. 18:21). Loss of the common, constant sound of the working mill represented economic deprivation (Jer. 25:10-11; Rev. 18:22).

Matthew 18:1-6 ... 1 At that time the disciples came to Jesus and said, “Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” 2 And He called a child to Himself and set him before them, 3 and said, “Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. 4 “Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. 5 “And whoever receives one such child in My name receives Me; 6 but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him to have a **heavy millstone** hung around his neck, and to be drowned in the depth of the sea. (NASB95)

Mark 9:42 ... 42 “Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe to stumble, it would be better for him if, with a **heavy millstone** hung around his neck, he had been cast into the sea. (NASB95)

Luke 17:1-2 ... 1 He said to His disciples, “It is inevitable that stumbling blocks come, but woe to him through whom they come! 2 “It would be better for him if a **millstone** were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea, than that he would cause one of these little ones to stumble. (NASB95)

Revelation 18:21 ... 21 Then a strong angel took up a stone like a **great millstone** and threw it into the sea, saying, “So will Babylon, the great city, be thrown down with violence, and will not be found any longer. (NASB95)

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Jeremiah 25:10-11 ... 10 ‘Moreover, I will take from them the voice of joy and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, **the sound of the millstones** and the light of the lamp. 11 ‘This whole land will be a desolation and a horror, and these nations will serve the king of Babylon seventy years. (NASB95)
Revelation 18:22 ... 22 “And the sound of harpists and musicians and flute-players and trumpeters will not be heard in you any longer; and no craftsman of any craft will be found in you any longer; and the sound of a mill will not be heard in you any longer; (NASB95)