

WHY THE DONKEY?

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And the great multitude who had come to the [Passover] feast, when they heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem, took the branches of the palm trees, and went out to meet him, and began to cry out, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the Name of the LORD, even the King of Israel".

And Jesus, finding a donkey, sat on it ... (John 12: 14).

Jesus' so-called *triumphal* entry into Jerusalem sitting on a donkey must be most significant. It appears in all four Gospels. We must therefore ask: Why, and especially, *Why the donkey?*

But first, we must step back to get the bigger picture. Up till this moment, Jesus had steadfastly refused to be openly proclaimed as Israel's Messianic King. Earlier in John's Gospel the crowds he had miraculously fed tried to take him by force to crown him as their king (John 6:15). Jesus *withdrew* from them.

When his own brothers urged him to go up to Jerusalem at the Feast of Tabernacles, they goaded him, 'Show yourself to the world!' Jesus told them, 'My time is not yet come' (John 7: 4). The three Synoptic Gospels tell us that on many occasions Jesus refused any fanfare.

But on this occasion, a week before his crucifixion with hundreds and hundreds of thousands there for the Passover, Jesus himself took the initiative to openly proclaim himself as Israel's king. ¹

JESUS "FINDS" A DONKEY!

Luke informs us it was the Lord who **sent two of the disciples to bring a donkey** already tethered for the occasion (Luke 19: 33), and in this way, **finding a donkey [he] sat on it** (John 12: 14). ² Through the agency of his disciples, Jesus took the initiative and fetched the donkey.

And when some of the Pharisees in the huge crowd told Jesus to rebuke his disciples for their wild adoration, Jesus answered that if the people should be silent, **even the stones would shout out, 'Hosanna'!** (Luke 19:40). On this occasion Jesus courted Israel's adoring attention.

So why the sudden change in Jesus' policy? And more particularly, what significance would riding a donkey into the city communicate?

¹ The contemporary historian Josephus estimated that more than 250,000 lambs would be slain in Jerusalem during a typical Passover season. He mentions that 10 people on average would eat one lamb, suggesting the Jewish population in Jerusalem during Passover would swell to between 2.5 and 3 million!

² Jesus had sent 2 disciples to fetch the donkey, and when they were challenged by the owners as to why they were untying it they replied, 'The Lord has need of him' (Lk 19: 31-34). John however, writes that it was Jesus who found the donkey -- the Greek verb is an active aorist participle third singular. (The word 'find' can also mean he attained or he acquired). Here is another of those instances of Jewish 'agency' where the one sent, is as the principal himself. For a fuller development of the theme of agency see the chapter 'Another World' pp 63 in *They Never Told Me This in Church!* You won't properly understand the Bible unless you grasp this principle of agency: The agent is as the principal himself.

I asked this question to a group of keen Bible students. Many excellent answers were given. All agreed it was not because Jesus needed to rest his weary bones --- he had just come only a few kilometres from Bethany where he had feasted the night before and been with friends in a welcoming home.

TO FULFILL PROPHECY

The consensus of that group was that the text itself tells us Jesus sat on the donkey to fulfill the prophetic Scriptures; *As it is written, Fear not, daughter of Zion: Behold your king comes sitting on a donkey's colt (John 12: 14-15)*. Absolutely true, but is that all there is to this incident with the donkey?

John is quoting his Hebrew Bible from **Zechariah** the ninth chapter. He is quick to mention that at the time of these events the disciples **did not understand these things at first (12: 16)**. It was not until after his resurrection and his exaltation to glory did the prophetic significance dawn on them.

So how could they miss the fulfillment of such a specific prediction right in front of their faces? Well, it has everything to do with context. The disciples, the Pharisees and the Jews were sure Zechariah's context pointed forward to a Messianic King who would come conquering the pagan occupiers of the land. More on this in a moment.

HISTORY REPEATS ITSELF?

There is no doubt too, that in the back of their minds there lurked a significant similar historic event that had happened not much more than a hundred years earlier. On that previous occasion the crowds had also sung 'the conqueror's Psalms 113-118' known as the *Hallel* which means *Praise God!* These very same verses had been shouted by crowds in Jerusalem one hundred years previous when they welcomed back **Simon Maccabaeus** after he had conquered Acra and delivered them from Syrian domination. Now they were heralding Jesus the same way.

Were they looking now at God's great conquering deliverer in the form of Jesus sitting on the donkey? Prior to **verse 13** of Zechariah's prophecy God promises He will destroy the power of the surrounding nations and eliminate war. No oppressor will afflict Jerusalem again. The Messiah will bring deliverance and speak peace to the nations after establishing God's justice.

Given this context the Jews no doubt thought, it's only a matter of time until the trumpets of war ring out, and the call to arms sweeps away pagan Rome under King Jesus! And so God will bring in lasting peace by destroying the oppressor and usher in universal prosperity for Israel. This would be cause for great joy;

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem: behold, thy king cometh unto thee: he is just, having salvation; lowly, and riding upon a donkey, upon a colt, the foal of a donkey (Zech. 9: 9).

It has to therefore be faced: Zechariah's prophecy does not seem to describe the circumstances of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

Is it any wonder the significance at the time was not understood by anybody looking on? Some commentators go so far as to suggest the NT writers actually got the whole incident wrong. Their expectations of a conquering messiah were never fulfilled but, in order to save face, they tried to gloss over the whole failed affair by rewriting history.

Not so fast!

The careful reader will observe that when quoting Zechariah's prophecy, the Gospel writers **omit several vital words**. *None of them quote the introduction; Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem ...* ³

The reason, I think, is that Zechariah's prediction (like most prophecy) will receive *another* fulfilment. It will only be fully realised when our Lord Jesus returns to earth at his *Parousia*, his Second Coming.

In other words, Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on the donkey is a type that anticipates his grand and ultimate entry when he shall come in the full display of his exalted Messianic Lordship over the entire planet. Only then, will Zechariah's prediction fully come to pass and, only then will there be great rejoicing in Zion and shouts of triumph by God's people.

The apostles knew what they were writing. They were careful in their handling of the Scriptures! ⁴

Like many types and shadows in the OT, the people strewing their palm branches in front of Jesus was a prophecy in action ... **You shall take for yourselves the foliage of beautiful trees, palm branches and ... you shall rejoice before the LORD your God ... (Lev. 23:40)**. Every time the Israelites celebrated the feast by waving their branches (called *lulabs*) and whether they realised it or not, they were anticipating the great feast in the Messianic Kingdom portrayed in **Revelation 7:9-10**;

Behold, a great multitude, which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches were in their hands; and they cry out with a loud voice saying, "Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."

The shouting crowds before Jesus as he rode the donkey into Jerusalem soon turned to jeers of rejection. In a few days they would be crying out, **"Away with him! Crucify him!"** Because Jesus did not receive his everlasting kingdom at this time, they felt let down. A crucified Messiah had no place in their minds. How evanescent, how fickle was their adoration on this occasion.

That's why it would have been so inappropriate for the evangelists to quote Zechariah's full prophecy, **Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem ...** Obviously Israel could not be called on to rejoice and shout with triumphant joy while she was about to **reject her Anointed King!** The rejoicing and triumphant shouts of praise await a future day yet.

It will not be until Israel has mourned and repented of her sin of rejecting their Lord Messiah will the spirit of joy come upon them nationally (e.g. **Zech. 12:10; Hos. 5:15, 6:1; Acts 3:19**, etc.)! On that day when the greater Joseph reveals himself to his brethren will theirs be the mourning of great joy! Oh LORD God, hasten that day so that all the world may be blessed in Your mercy and faithfulness! ⁵

A YOUNG DONKEY DEMONSTRATES JESUS' CHARACTER

As an interesting aside, did you notice the age of this donkey? Right. It was a young donkey, a colt, and one on which **no one yet has ever sat (Luke 19:30)**. This is highly significant. Under the Mosaic

³ This is not the first time the NT writers *seem to inadequately quote* their OT Bible. Some allege they *inaccurately* quote, but always a careful reading shows otherwise. Many examples of such careful handling of their Scriptures could be supplied. For an interesting exercise the reader might like to look at Peter's quote from **Joel 2** as he explains the events of the Day of Pentecost. What interesting features of difference can you find by his application, **"This is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel"**? Did Peter accurately quote Joel? If not, why not?

⁴ In his *The Daily Study Bible* **William Barclay** goes so far as to suggest, "John does not quote accurately because obviously he is quoting from memory"!

⁵ **Genesis 45: 1f.**

Law only those animals which had never been worked could qualify for sacrificial purposes. Besides not allowing defective animals, Israel was directed to bring an animal **on which a yoke has never been placed ... one which has not been worked and which has not pulled in a yoke ...** (Num. 19:2; Deut. 21:3). How significant then that Jesus selected a colt of a donkey, a young animal which had never been previously ridden. That young donkey carried a unique and spotless Sacrifice into Jerusalem! God is a stickler for detail!

WHAT IF?

If only Israel had accepted their king that day, the history of the world would have been marvellously changed forever. But it is idle speculation because we know that did not happen. The king was not coronated --- he was crucified --- so the kingdom of God was not then inaugurated. Jesus prophesied that Israel would not see him again until they would say from repentant hearts, **“Blessed is he who comes in the Name of the LORD”** (Matt. 23:39)!

Now, I wonder whether that young donkey had anything to do with their fateful rejection that day? After all, the prophet Zechariah had said Israel’s king would come, **humble and mounted on a donkey** (Zech. 9: 9). ⁶ Matthew is the only Gospel writer to mention this part of the prophecy, and don’t forget Matthew is the most “Jewish” of all the Gospels. The King James Version often translates the word as “meek”, but “gentle” hits the mark better. The hint seems to be that the gentleness of Jesus on a donkey was somewhat offensive, or at least disappointing, to the Jews. How so?

The whole action of Jesus coming on a donkey was a signal that he was coming in peace. A king riding on a horse would indicate warlike intentions. I have no doubt the crowds hailing Jesus as the conquering Messiah must have pained his gentle heart greatly that day. They were hoping for the very thing he refused to do. He is a gentleman and he is the gentle king!

THE HORSE WAS FORBIDDEN!

One thing that marked Israel out as God’s unique people was the **absence of the horse**. Besides being forbidden to have a foreigner over them as king **who is not your brother (a Jew)**, Israel’s king **shall not multiply horses for himself, nor shall he cause the people to return to Egypt to multiply horses ...** (Deut. 17: 14f). That was an express decree forbidding Israel’s king(s) to multiply horses!

In this way Israel’s king was to be distinguished from the pagan nations. The kings of Egypt, Canaan, Assyria, Babylonia etc. are mentioned as possessing many horses and chariots. ⁷ God had to often remind His people that their deliverance did not come from horses;

Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help, and rely on horses, and trust in chariots because they are many, and in horsemen because they are very strong, but they do not look to the Holy One of Israel, nor seek the LORD! ... Now the Egyptians are men, and not God, and their horses are flesh and not spirit ... (Isaiah 31: 1-3).

The first recorded sin of Solomon was concerning this very thing; **And Solomon had 40,000 stalls of horses for his chariots, and 12,000 horsemen** (I Kings 4: 26)! So, in his riding that donkey Jesus was showing he was the true King of Israel, a true Son of God, different from the kings, dictators, conquerors, and oppressors of this world’s empires.

Indeed, even the donkey he rode was **borrowed!** Jesus demonstrated that the things which this world highly esteems are **an abomination in God’s sight** (Luke 16: 15). You can be absolutely sure that no Roman standing at his post that day felt any unease as he saw Jesus riding a --- “Hey Brutus, what’s

⁶ The LXX uses the Greek word **gentle**.

⁷ E.g. Exodus 14:23; 15: 1; Joshua 11:4; 2 Kings 5:9; Isaiah 37: 8.

that bloke down there riding, you say? A what? *A donkey?*" --- chuckles of laughter and scorn! Truly did Jesus say, "**My kingdom is not of this world**".

OBJECTION!

But doesn't the book of **Revelation** contradict all this? Didn't John see **heaven open, and behold a white horse; and he who sat upon it is called Faithful and True; and in righteousness he judges and wages war ... and he is clothed with a robe dipped in blood; and his name is called The Word of God (Rev. 19: 11f)?**

The demeanour of the risen Christ has certainly changed. He now rides a white horse, symbol of majesty and overcoming power. The donkey was fitting for a rejected Messiah, but a white horse now befits God's Son in his glory and everlasting dominion!

The first so-called *triumphal entry* into Jerusalem was really a *tearful entry*. For **when he approached the city near the descent of the Mount of Olives ... he saw the city and wept over it, saying, "If you had known in this day, even you, the things which make for peace! But now they have been hidden from your eyes (Luke 19: 37f).**

Jesus felt keenly their national rejection of him as Israel's Messiah and Anointed King. He knew God's plan for the world would be postponed. And he wept for the trouble soon to come on them not in the too distant future. It's been well said, that those who forget their own history are doomed to repeat it. The only thing history teaches us is that history teaches us nothing!

ONCE BEFORE ISRAEL NEARLY CROWNED THE WRONG KING!

There was a dramatic moment in Israel's history that sheds enormous light on Jesus riding the donkey into Jerusalem. You'll find it in **First Kings chapter 1**. King David was not long left for this world. He is **advanced in age**. But there is one big problem. Who will succeed him as king has not been publicly declared..

One of his sons Adonijah decides to **exalt himself** and he makes plans to proclaim himself as Israel's new king. He --- significantly!! --- **prepares for himself chariots and horsemen**. He enlists David's general Joab and Abiathar the priest to help him anoint and appoint himself to the throne of Israel. He invites most of the royal family and the royal retinue to his coronation. Those he knew would not endorse him were not invited of course --- Solomon was not invited, nor was David, nor Bathsheba, nor was **Benaiah and the mighty men**, nor was the priest Zadok. But animals are sacrificed (got to keep up religious appearances!) and the festive music of celebration and dancing is heard.

The one slight problem of course is that David has not endorsed any of this, nor has Nathan the prophet. Once David is apprised of this threatening and disastrous situation he says,

'Call Bathsheba to me.' And she came into the king's presence and stood before the king. And the king vowed and said, 'As the LORD [YHWH, *Adonai*] lives, who has redeemed my life from all distress, surely as I vowed to you by the LORD the God of Israel, saying, 'Your son Solomon shall be king after me, and he shall sit on my throne in my place'; I will indeed do so this day.'

Then Bathsheba bowed with her face to the ground, and prostrated herself to the king and said, 'May my lord [*Adoni*] King David live forever.'

Then King David said, 'Call to me Zadok the priest, Nathan the prophet, and Benaiah the son of Jehoiada', and they came into the king's presence. And the king said to them, 'Take with you the servants of your lord, and **have my son Solomon ride on my own mule, and bring him down to**

Gihon. And let Zadok the priest and Nathan the prophet anoint him there as king over Israel, and blow the trumpet and say, 'Long live Solomon!'

'Then you shall come up after him, and he shall come and sit on my throne and be king in my place; for I have appointed him to be ruler over Israel and Judah.' (I Kings 1: 28-34).

Thus, Adonijah, the wrong man, was nearly the self-crowned king of Israel. Thankfully, civil war was averted by David's belated but now swift and decisive gesture. The sign to the people that Solomon was David's legitimate successor and the real Anointed king was that **he sat on his father's mule!** **Riding the king's mule was proof that he will sit on David's throne!**

Fast forward: Jesus had told the people, "A greater than Solomon is here" (Matt. 12:42)! Now, as he enters Jerusalem in this highly evocative re-enactment, God was declaring to the nation, "This is Jesus Christ the king of Israel. Sitting on the donkey today is the guarantee he is fit to sit on My Throne tomorrow!"⁸

JACOB'S DYING PROPHECY

Way back in **Genesis chapter 49** this moment was predicted, for on his deathbed the patriarch Jacob declared in the Holy Spirit, **what shall befall you** (his descendants) **in the last days** (an OT expression referring to the times of the Messiah which began at his first advent and will be completed at his second) (v.1);

The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until Shiloh comes, and to him shall be the gathering (hope, expectation, & obedience) of the peoples. **He ties his foal to the vine; and his donkey's colt to the choice vine...** (Genesis 49: 10-11).

This is an audacious prediction that God would preserve the tribe of Judah until Shiloh (the Peacemaker) the Messiah would be revealed to mark "the last days". When Jesus arrived, ten tribes of Israel had long ago been carried off into captivity, and had never returned. To all intents and purposes they were 'lost'. But God's word never fails.

The **Vine** was Israel (e.g. **Isaiah 5**) and still growing in the Promised Land. The **Choice Vine** was Messiah himself (e.g. **John 15:1**). And Jacob's prophecy is stunning in its breathtaking fulfilment as Jesus rides the donkey into Jerusalem ... **He ties his foal to the Vine; and his donkey's colt to the Choice Vine !!!**

Why the donkey? Why the donkey? When Jesus, heaven's Anointed King rode the donkey into Jerusalem, God was officially presenting him as Israel's Messianic Lord and King. Just as Solomon's sitting on his father's donkey heralded him to be the chosen king, so riding that donkey into Jerusalem was proof that Jesus is the one to sit on Israel's Throne. History foreshadowed it. Prophecy predicted it.

Oh Israel. Hail your King! You shall yet rejoice and shout in triumph. Your King has come but you did not recognise the Day of your visitation. Repent and turn and be saved.

Oh nations of the world. Why do you imagine a vain thing? Why do you kings and rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and his Anointed? Be wise. For God has declared this gentle Man will yet rule the nations. Serve the LORD in awe, and rejoice in trembling. Kiss the Son, make your peace with him, lest you perish from the way. Yes, O LORD, blessed are all those who put their trust in You and in your Son, the King.⁹

⁸ Jesus Christ means, "Jesus, God's chosen king". It does not mean, Jesus, God the Son!

⁹ See **Psalm 2**.

