

Jesus & Two Donkeys Straddling, Skiing, or Semitic Meaning-Squeezing?

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Jesus either had a large bum, was an agile cowboy or had a midrashic Gospel writer when it comes to Jesus' Triumphal Entry according to Matthew (21:1-9). Matthew's version has a donkey (*onos*) and a colt (*polos*); Jesus seemingly sits upon them both. Or does he?

Let's recall the story of the Triumphal or Messianic Entry as found in all four Gospels: Mt. 21:1-9; Mk 11:1-10; Lk 19:28-40, and Jn 12:12-19. After leaving Bethany (see below), Jesus sends a couple of disciples to prepare a donkey (or two, so Mt by following Zechariah 9:9b) for his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Around Bethphage, Jesus met up with the donkey/s and began his "Messianic Entry." The crowd spread garments, waved branches and shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David" (Mt) and "Blessed is the King" (Lk) and "Blessed is the (presently) coming kingdom of our father David" (Mk).

Jesus' Starting Point: The House of the Poor and Afflicted

All four accounts have Jesus coming from Bethany, meaning "house of the poor" or "house of the afflicted" in Hebrew.¹ Jerome gives the equivalent *domus afflictionis* in his Latin translation of Eusebius' *Onomasticon*—a fourth-century Holy Land Gazetteer.² Further support for Bethany as a "house of the afflicted" comes from the Temple Scroll, a unique rewriting of the Pentateuch found in cave 11 at Qumran, "You shall also make three places, to the east of the city [i.e. Jerusalem], separate from each other, to which shall come the lepers and those afflicted with discharges..."³ The connections are inviting: Bethany is approximately three kilometers east of Jerusalem, is where Jesus reportedly heals Simon the leper (Mt 26:6, Mk 14:3), and the name Bethany can be understood as "House of the Poor/Afflicted".⁴

Other than the Messianic Entry, Bethany is mentioned a surprising number of times in the Gospels.⁵ It is noteworthy that we do not find Jesus staying in Jerusalem where the religious authorities are but rather in "The House of the Poor/Afflicted," an ironic starting point towards his triumphal Messianic Entry.

Why a Donkey? Donkeys and Redemptive Players

Donkeys were not always seen as "asses." The donkey and the camel were the automobiles of the day. But beyond this, donkeys had been used in redemptive/kingly events. Jews remembered Solomon's coronation in the Kidron Valley between the Mt. of Olives and the Temple as recorded in 1 Kings 1:37-40:

¹ "'Ani" in Marcus Jastrow, *Dictionary of the Targumim, The Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature*. (Jerusalem: Horeb, 1903, reprint), 1094.

² Jerome, "Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea: Das Onomastikon der biblischen Ortsnamen." Erich Klostermann, ed. (Leipzig : J.C. Hinrich, 1904).

³ 11QT 46:16-18, italics mine. Even though this passage uses an imperative form, it may reflect the social situation at the time of writing. Translation based upon M.O. Wise, M.G. Abegg, and E. M. Cook. *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation*. (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 478.

⁴ Saller, S. *Excavations at Bethany, 1949-1953*. (Jerusalem: SBF, No. 12. 1957). Joan E. Taylor, "The Cave at Bethany." *Revue Biblique* 94, no. 1 (1987): 120-123 and *ibid.*, "The Bethany Cave: A Jewish-Christian Cult Site?" *Revue Biblique* 97, no. 3 (1990): 453-465.

⁵ Jesus bunks in Bethany when coming to Jerusalem (Matt. 21:17, Jn. 12:1, Mk. 11:11, 12). Bethany is where Lazarus one of Jesus' best friends was from (Jn. 11:1, 18 Jn. 11:18, Jn. 12:1), where Jesus heals and visits (Mt 26:6, Mk 14:3), and where he reportedly ascends (Lk. 24:50).

‘As the LORD has been with my lord the king, so may he be with Solomon, and make his throne greater than the throne of my lord King David.’ So the priest Zadok, the prophet Nathan, and Benaiah son of Jehoiada...went down and had Solomon ride on King David's mule, and led him to Gihon. There the priest Zadok took the horn of oil from the tent and anointed Solomon. Then they blew the trumpet, and all the people said, "Long live King Solomon!" And all the people went up following him, playing on pipes and rejoicing with great joy, so that the earth quaked at their noise⁶

The association between Jesus and Solomon, both “sons of David” and its messianic connotation was not lost on the crowd at Passover. So, donkeys were not only practical, they were part of a narrative of redemptive and kingly association which was at work in Mt 21:1-9.

Messianic import was heightened, maybe even in a revolutionary or nationalistic manner, through the waving of branches⁷ and with the invocation of Psalm 118, a psalm of the Hallel. This Triumphant Entry began at the edge of the city⁸—at Bethpage or “House of the Unripe Fig”⁹—and was pregnant with messianic symbolism; Yet it was a journey that began from the “House of the Poor.”

But Two Donkeys? Matthew and Biblical Parallelism

Only Matthew has a colt *and* a donkey for Jesus. The question immediately arises, “Did Jesus straddle the colt and the donkey, or did he use both donkeys sitting to the side like a queen. Did he “ski bareback into Jerusalem” like Antonio Banderas rode in “the Mask of Zorro?” How uncomfortable or challenging! There’s relief for the realistic as we find that in the three other Gospel accounts, only the *singular* colt appears.¹⁰ Yet, the challenge remains to understand why Matthew’s account connects Jesus with two animals.

Backing up we can note that Biblical Hebrew often employed paired synonyms to poetically describe the *same* object. Examples abound. In Psalm 15:1 the sanctuary and holy hill refer to *one* place, “LORD, who may dwell in your sanctuary? Who may live on your holy hill?” This same type of synonymous parallelism can be found in Zech 9:9b, “behold, thy King comes to you: he is just, and having salvation; lowly, and riding upon an ass, and/yea upon a colt the foal of an ass.”¹¹ Whereas Mark and Luke do not cite Zech. 9:9 and John solves the two-donkey dilemma by explicitly combining it into a “donkey’s colt” (Jn. 12:15b), Matthew deliberately uses

⁶ Note could also be made to Gen 22:3 (Abraham and Isaac), Num 22:21f. (Balaam’s donkey) and possibly Ex 4:20 (Moses going to Egypt) where donkeys and redemptive acts are brought together.

⁷ Compare 1 Macc 13:51, 2 Macc 10:7, and Jn 12:13, along with coins from the Messianic Bar Kochba period. The same palm branch image is even used today on the one shekel coin.

⁸ Bethpage is mentioned in early Jewish literature outside of the New Testament in relation to the confines of Jerusalem, for example in M. Menahot 11:2 regarding the validity of the showbread, etc. See H. Danby, *The Mishnah*. (New York: Oxford, 1933) 507 n.6 and 500, n.11. See also S. Saller and E. Testa. *The Archaeological Setting of the Shrine of Bethphage*. Jerusalem: SBF Smaller Series No. 1, 1961.

⁹ “Paga” in Jastrow, *ibid.* 1132. Connections between figs, Jesus’ prophetic condemnation of the fig tree, and how one will know the seasons, are inviting, but would require more space than this article allows.

¹⁰ It is possible that Matthew is simply referring to a donkey leading its colt, but his exegetical style strongly conflicts with a natural reading. See the references to Stendahl and Goulder below.

¹¹ Zech 9:9 was commonly used as relating to the Messiah. Gen. Rabbah 98:9, B. San 98a, 99a, Koh R. 1.9. See Billerbeck I:842f. and Samuel Lachs, Samuel. *A Rabbinic Commentary On The New Testament*. (Hoboken, NJ: KTAV, 1987) 344-345. Jacob’s last words to his Judah about a foal and a colt (Gen 49:1, 10-11) may be reflective of Zechariah’s later prophecy.

Zechariah 9:9b, making reference to the *two* animals or garments of the animals *three times* (21:2b, 5, 7).¹²

Matthew as Midrash

Why does Matthew “expand” the Hebrew parallelism into two animals? Not because Matthew naively followed the Hebrew version of Zech 9:9b without paying close attention to the subsequent practical issue (which is doubtful *per* Stendahl and Goulder), but because Matthew capitalized on the ambiguity in the Hebrew text and used Messianic interpretations (like those based in Zech 9:9, Is 62:11, Ps 118; cf. Footnote 11) to provide a picture of the Messiah, ushering in the Kingdom of God, with one donkey free.

Matthew splits the Zechariah text, thereby creating two donkeys, for a purpose: the other donkey is for other disciples to join him in his lowly and redemptive reign.¹³ Matthew, like many Jews in the Second Temple period, read the Hebrew Bible for all possible readings. Matthew’s reading of Zech 9:9 could betray something like a midrash, an edifying use to a textual “problem” which brings the text alive! He squeezed meaning: the King desired others to join the redemptive event.

Prior to the Messianic Entry, Jesus had announced this breaking forth with a unique midrashic and messianic retelling of Micah 2:12-13, “But since the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has been breaking forth, and the breaking forth [noisy sheep] are caught up in it.”¹⁴ Jesus, after leaving the “House of the Poor” begins a journey on a donkey that would lead him to the single most publicly recognized messianic act of his life, the Triumphal Entry. The second donkey then may well be a midrashic message for Jesus’ disciples--an invitation to break forth into and ride with God’s lowly redemptive reign.

¹² Subsequent to writing this article I came upon two similar treatments of Mt 21:1-9 which corroborate the above midrashic thesis. Cf. Krister Stendahl, *The School of St. Matthew and Its Use of the Old Testament*. (Ramsey, NJ: Sigler Press, 1991 [1968]), 118-120, 200; and M. D. Goulder, *Midrash and Lection in Matthew*. (London: SPCK, 1974) 22, 412.

¹³ John 4:38 speaks of entering into a gracious “labor” of God, “I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor; others have labored, and you have entered into their labor.”

¹⁴ Matthew 11:12. *Biazetai* (violently or forcefully) here is understood as an active rather than a passive. Compare NIV, “advancing forcefully” and Luke 16:16. Micah 2:12-13 is interpreted by Redak in Pesikta Rabbati 35:4 as, “Our rabbis of blessed memory and the midrash teach, ‘The breaker is Elijah and their King is the Branch, the Son of David.’” Cf. Malachi 3:1 and 4:5-6 for John paralleling Elijah. See also Is. 52:7, 12; Ps. 118:19-20, 26-27. For secondary literature see Robert L. Lindsey, *The Jesus Sources: Understanding the Gospels* (Tulsa, OK: HaKeshet, 1990) 75-79; R. Steven Notley, “The Kingdom of Heaven Forcefully Advances.” In *The Interpretation of Scripture in Early Judaism and Christianity*, edited by Craig A. Evans, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000, 279-311; and. Marinus de Jonge, “Jesus’ Role in the Final Breakthrough of God’s Kingdom.” In *Geschichte-Tradition-Reflection, Vol. 3*, edited by H Hichtenberger, 265-285. (Tubingen: Mohr, 1996).