

“Jesus Found a Young Donkey...”

John 12:12-16

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I have received a request to talk about the donkey. You know, the donkey that Jesus rode on when he entered Jerusalem. You could make an argument that the donkey is the unsung hero of Palm Sunday. I mean, every year we *mention* the donkey – it’s a critical character in the story – but how often do we really *talk* about the donkey? How often do we sing its praises? Have we ever looked at the story from the *donkey’s* point of view? What would the Palm Sunday story be, without the donkey?

I’m kidding – in part. The central figure in the story is, of course, *Jesus*. The donkey serves an important role; the story would be very different if the donkey weren’t in it, but the story isn’t about the donkey. Yet there are some questions about the donkey. Was it a donkey, or a colt, or a foal, and what’s the difference? Was there more than one donkey? Most importantly, what does the donkey *represent*? What does it *symbolize*? Why does it matter that Jesus came into Jerusalem on a *donkey*?

Let’s start with what the gospel stories have to say. This is one of the few stories that can be found in all four gospels. John simply says “Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it.” (John 12:14) The other gospels give us more details. Mark calls it a “colt.” In that gospel, Jesus tells his disciples, as they are approaching Jerusalem from Bethphage and Bethany on the Mount of Olives, to “go into the village” and “find tied there a colt that has never been ridden.” They are to untie the colt and bring it to Jesus. If anyone asks them what they are doing, they are to say “The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.” So, in effect, *Jesus was borrowing* the colt. The disciples throw their cloaks on it, then Jesus mounts it. Then he heads down the Mount of Olives, while people were spreading out cloaks and palm branches in front of him, shouting, “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” (Mark 11:1-10) Luke’s version of the story is almost identical to Mark’s, although Luke doesn’t include the bit about Jesus *returning* the colt when he is done with it. (Luke 19:29-38)

Matthew’s version of the story is a little different. In that account, there are *two* animals, a donkey *and* a colt. Jesus instructs two of his disciples: “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, *and a colt with her*; untie *them* and bring *them* to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs *them*.’ And he will send *them* immediately.” So, Matthew tells us, “The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on *them*, and he sat on *them*.” I wonder how he did that. I mean, how can you ride *two* animals at the *same time*? For that’s what it sounds like Jesus did – at least, in Matthew’s version of the story. Thankfully, Matthew doesn’t throw us any more curve balls; the rest of his Palm Sunday story is pretty much the same as in Mark and Luke. (Matthew 21:1-9)

So – to sum up. In John there is one animal: a donkey. In Mark and Luke there is one animal: a

colt. But in Matthew, there are *two* animals, a donkey *and* a colt. Which leads to the next question: *what's the difference* between a donkey and a colt? Well, in English, a *donkey* is a specific variety of animal in the horse family; its official name is *equus africanus asinus*. A young donkey is called a *foal*. A young *male* donkey is called a *colt*. Mark and Luke make it clear: Jesus rode a young *male* donkey.

But remember, we read the New Testament in a translation, and the meanings of some words can change when you're translating from one language to another. So I checked the Greek. I'll spare you the details, but basically we find the same thing in Greek that we do in English. John calls the animal a "little donkey" or the "colt of a donkey." Mark and Luke both call the animal "a colt." And Matthew says that Jesus rode both a "donkey" and a "colt." So John, Mark, and Luke all paint a very consistent picture. It's only Matthew that seems to be complicating things, with two animals instead of one.

Which then leads to the question: *why?* Why does Matthew have Jesus riding *two* animals, where the other gospels have him riding just one? Well, that has to do with the *prophecy* that Jesus is fulfilling when he enters Jerusalem, a prophecy from the book of Zechariah, in the Old Testament. Zechariah had said this: "Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey." (Zechariah 9:9) Two of the four gospel writers – John and Matthew – quote this verse in their account of the Palm Sunday story. But they quote it *differently*. John says: "Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion. Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!" (John 12:15) Matthew says: "Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey." (Matthew 21:5) In Greek, John's quotation from Zechariah is 13 words long, whereas Matthew's is 19, and some of the words are not the same. Both of them were using Greek translations of the Old Testament, but it seems they were using *different translations*. It's the same problem we have today; if you've ever been in a Bible study, and you're trying to figure out the meaning of a specific verse, and one person says, "My Bible says *this*," and another person says, "Well, my Bible says *this*," it can be hard to figure out what the Bible *really* says. The part of this that matters for us today is that it appears that the translation of Zechariah that Matthew had in front of him when he wrote this passage in his gospel mentioned *two* animals rather than just one: "your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, *and* on a colt, the foal of a donkey." In the original Hebrew, Zechariah's prophecy envisioned that the king would ride "on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey," that is to say, "on a donkey, *more specifically*, on a colt, the foal of a donkey" – just one animal. But some translator apparently thought Zechariah was referring to two different animals, and so added the little word "and." The translation of Zechariah that John used mentioned only *one* animal, but the translation Matthew used mentioned two. It's amazing what a difference the word "and" can make!

Now how to make sense of all this? How can Jesus ride *one* animal and *two* animals at the same time? Biblical interpreters have pondered this one ever since the days of the early church. One traditional interpretation is that Jesus first rode one animal, and then he rode another. But the distance from Bethphage to Jerusalem is short – only a couple miles – so it's unlikely that the animal would have gotten tired. Another interpretation is that the adult donkey was the mother of the young donkey, so when Jesus's disciples fetched the young donkey to ride on, its mother came along as well. Some early Christian interpreters saw the two donkeys in Matthew's version of the story as metaphors: one represented the faithful Jews, and the other represented the Gentiles; the idea here is that Jesus is leading *both* groups to salvation. And, of course, there are those who just figure that somewhere along the way, someone made a mistake. Christianity has not traditionally claimed that the Bible is perfect

and flawless in *all* its details – just the ones that have to do with matters of doctrine: what it has to say about God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the human condition, our need for salvation, and so forth.

So let's set aside the question of one or two donkeys, and turn to the most significant question: what does it *mean* that Jesus rode a donkey into Jerusalem? What did that donkey *represent*?

Well, donkeys were – and still are – beasts of burden, widely used for farming, hauling goods, carrying people on lengthy journeys, and so forth. Donkeys have a very long history in the Middle East; they were domesticated there about three thousand years ago. Abraham, in the book of Genesis, had a large supply of donkeys. Joseph's brothers made trips back and forth to Egypt riding donkeys. Local chieftains and rulers in the days of the Judges – some thirteen centuries before Jesus – rode on donkeys. There were no horses yet in Israel – horses didn't arrive until the time of King Solomon, some ten centuries before Jesus. Horses are stronger and faster than donkeys; given a choice, kings and rulers would rather have horses than donkeys. But donkeys were more plentiful, so in time it came to pass in Israel that horses generally belonged to the elite, and donkeys to the common people.

So if a king were to come to Jerusalem in the days of Jesus, he would ordinarily arrive on a horse, not a donkey. That horse would be fitted out with a fine, regal saddle; it would be draped in regal colors; its bit and bridle studded with jewels. The king would want to make an *impression*, of course.

But Jesus came to Jerusalem on a donkey. A donkey that he didn't own, but had borrowed. A donkey that wasn't fitted out with a fine regal saddle or draped in regal colors, but was instead draped with dirty, dusty, ragged cloaks belonging to some of Jesus' disciples. There were no studded jewels. There were only palms – which were simply *leaves* that had been ripped off of trees. There was nothing special about the animal, nothing special about the saddle, nothing special about *any* of it. It was like a cheap imitation of a royal procession. It was like what you would see in a very, *very* low-budget movie.

It was practically laughable. Romans and other bystanders watching this strange procession might have sneered or jeered. *This guy* thinks he's a king? He's like someone *pretending* to be a king.

Except, of course, he *really was* a king. Really *is* a king. Really *is the* King, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Coming to Jerusalem, in fulfillment of prophecy, not quite yet "triumphant and victorious" – that would come soon enough, on Easter Sunday – but certainly presenting a curious mixture of *authority* and *humility* at the same time. He didn't look like a king; he looked like a commoner. He wasn't surrounded by a royal retinue, but by a ragtag, motley collection of women and men, tax collectors and fisherman, sinners and prostitutes, people who had once been blind or lame – people whose lives had been drastically and dramatically *changed* by what they had learned and what they had gained from this carpenter's son from Nazareth. As the procession nears Jerusalem, everyone in the city can hear the shouts and acclamations: "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

Go ahead, Jerusalem. Go ahead, scribes and Pharisees; go ahead, Sanhedrin, members of the Jewish council; go ahead, Pontius Pilate, Roman governor of Palestine. Go ahead. *Do your worst*. You *think* you're the ones in authority; you *think* you're in charge; you *think* you can control this situation. Go ahead. Do your worst to this donkey-riding wannabee. Then *behold* what God will do through him.

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