

# How to Make an Entrance

Hespeler, April 2, 2023 © Scott McAndless – Palm Sunday

Isaiah 50:4-9a, Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29, Philippians 2:5-11, [Matthew 21:1-11](#)

I have a question that is a kind a test about whether or not you were listening to our gospel reading this morning. We read the story of the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem from the Good News

Translation of the Gospel of Matthew.

Jesus sends his disciples to get some transportation to carry him in his triumphal procession into the city. They bring him what he asks for he sits on what they bring and the parade begins, right? I'm sure you all followed that just fine as we read it. My question is this: *what* did Jesus get on?

## Got on What?

Here is the verse I am curious about. Verse seven reads like this: **“They (the disciples) brought the donkey and the colt, threw their cloaks over them, and Jesus got on.”** (GNT) So it clearly says that the disciples brought back two animals – a mother donkey and her colt. It says that they then threw their cloaks over both of them. And then it says that Jesus got on. Got on what? On the mother? On the colt? On both animals? No, that can't be right, can it? I mean, can you imagine somebody riding two donkeys at once? That would be ridiculous!

Ah well, I guess we just don't know. In fact, the translators of this passage have led us to think that they don't know either. Presumably the original Greek text of this Gospel did not make it clear which animal Jesus rode. I mean why else would they render it into English using such an imprecise phrase as **“Jesus got on.”**

## What it Actually Says

But wait a minute, we don't need to speculate. We can just find out for ourselves. I can show you what is actually written in the Greek. Do you want to know what the original text says that Jesus got on? Was it the mother? Was it the colt? Because, I mean, it can't possibly be both, am I right? Ha, ha, ha, oh.

Well, just in case some of you are a little bit rusty on your Koine Greek, it does say very clearly which animal Jesus got on. It says he got on *them* – on both animals. The translators clearly understood that very well, they just decided to translate it as something that was unclear because, well, it just seems a bit silly that it would say that. But it does.

## Who Wrote the Gospel?

The Gospel of Matthew, according to tradition, was written by none other than Matthew, the disciple of Jesus. And if that is true, then surely the author of this passage would have been there that day, would have been reporting on that triumphal entrance as a first-hand witness.

But wait a second. That can't be, can it? Because if the person who wrote this passage was present and reporting as an eyewitness, how could he not describe how it was that Jesus managed to ride both of these beasts into the city?



Did he ride with one foot on the back of each donkey like a water-skier? Did he sit on the bigger one and put his feet on the smaller one? Did he put the colt on the back of its mother and then ride on top? If you had seen any of those feats, how could you possibly resist describing what it looked like? Come on, Matthew, you have got to let us know!

## The Writer Wasn't There

But we have no such description, which is probably an indication that the writer was not there that day. In fact, the Gospel itself never claims to have been written by Matthew, never claims to have been written by anyone, in fact. There was no name on the original document.

And most scholars today would argue that there are other reasons for thinking this gospel writer was not an eyewitness. For one thing, we know that he used at least one other Gospel as a source. He copied whole passages out of the Gospel of Mark into his Gospel. Generally, you would not expect a firsthand witness to be copying descriptions of things from another book!

## The Changes Matthew Makes

He does often copy things from Mark word-for-word. But sometimes he also makes some changes. For example, in Mark's story of the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, the story is told in almost the exact same words, but there is a significant difference. Mark says that Jesus only rode into town on one donkey. Jesus sends the disciples to get one animal, a colt, they bring back one animal, they throw their cloaks on *it* and Jesus sits on *it*. Yes, the story does seem a bit more sensible in Mark's Gospel.

But that immediately makes you ask a question, doesn't it? Why would the writer of Matthew (let's just call him Matthew, whoever he was, because that'll make it easier) make such a change? He seems to have done it intentionally, even though it doesn't make much practical sense. People have wondered about that question for centuries now. It's one of those hot topics in New Testament scholarship.

## The Usual Explanation

And many scholars will try to explain the reason why Matthew made that change. He actually tips us off in the passage itself. He adds something to the account from the Gospel of Mark by saying, **"This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet: '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.'"**

So, you can see what Matthew is doing here. He knows that what happened when Jesus entered into Jerusalem was the fulfillment of this prophecy from the book of Zechariah. Of course, the other gospel writers knew this as well, as did most early Christians. But Matthew is the only one who says that explicitly in his Gospel, even taking the trouble to quote the passage.

## Matthew Notices Something

But, when he quotes the passage, he notices something that maybe Mark didn't pay much attention to. He notices that the passage in Zechariah speaks of the Messiah arriving on two animals – **"mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey."**

And so, having gone to the trouble of quoting it, Matthew says to himself, "Oh look, it says in the Bible that the Messiah has to enter on two animals. So, I guess that's what must have happened, and Mark just forgot to mention it." So, when Matthew comes to tell the story, he tells it that way. That is pretty obviously what has happened.

## Hebrew Poetry

But there is one thing that is a bit funny about that. The two animals are not really there in the Old Testament passage. The prophecies of Zechariah were written in poetry. And ancient Hebrew poetry had a unique form.

Ancient Hebrew poems didn't rhyme or use particular metres like English poems often do. Rather than repeating sounds, they repeated meanings. In a typical Hebrew poem, and there are lots of them in the Bible, the poet generally says something in one way in one line and then, in the next line, says the same thing just using different words.

Take, for example, the closing lines of the twenty-third psalm: **"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, / and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long."** Those two phrases are essentially saying the same thing, just using different words. And that kind of pattern is all over ancient Hebrew poetry. So actually, when the prophet Zechariah says, **"mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey,"** that is just two ways of referring to the same donkey. The prophet never thought that the Messiah would arrive riding on two beasts.

## Is Something Else Going on?

So the whole question then becomes, did Matthew simply not understand how ancient Hebrew poetry worked? Is his whole insistence that there had to be two animals for Jesus to ride based on a simple misunderstanding? There are a number of scholars who seem to think so. And maybe they are right. But I cannot help but wonder whether there might just be something else going on here.

What if Matthew actually did understand how Hebrew poetry worked? And what if he was hoping that his readers would just pay attention to what he did here? Doesn't every writer hope that? Maybe he expected us to read this passage and say, hey, wait a minute, wouldn't it have looked kind of silly for Jesus to ride in on two animals? He wanted to make us stop and think for a moment.

And maybe the two donkeys are not about what actually happened that day; maybe they are not based on a misunderstanding of ancient poetry. No, I think it might have been Matthew's symbolic way of saying something important to us readers.

Of course, if that is the case, then it is really a shame that the translators of the Good New Bible have obscured what Matthew actually wrote. I'm not sure that the Gospel writer would be happy with what they did here.

## A Theme in this Gospel

There is a theme that runs through the Gospel of Matthew. Several times in the course of this gospel, Matthew makes a point of talking about what happens when you mix the old with the new. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus quotes from the old law of Moses and then goes on to give new interpretations of how it should be applied. This pattern is followed several times.

And then there is a parable of Jesus that is found only in this gospel. Jesus says to his disciples, **"Therefore every scribe who has become a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."** (Matthew 13:52)

## A Message in This

So this idea of carefully putting the old and the new together in some creative way runs throughout this whole gospel. In fact, a number of people have suggested that Matthew sees himself as the scribe in

that parable that only he repeats. This is how he saw his job as gospel writer, to carefully put together the old and the new and, in so doing, to create a completely different understanding.

So I somehow do not think that it is an accident or a mistake that Matthew is the only gospel writer to tell us that Jesus rode into Jerusalem on the backs of two donkeys. Because, of course, these were not two ordinary donkeys. It was a donkey and a colt – a mother and her child. It was an old donkey and a new one. I think that Matthew was saying something very important to the church – something much more important than would have been accomplished with a simple literal description of what happened when Jesus rode into Jerusalem.

## Expectations

It seems clear that when Jesus arrived in Jerusalem, he was met with very high expectations. Many of those expectations were likely based on old ideas – the restoration of the old kingdom of David, the restoration of old traditions and ways of doing things. They may not have used the exact words, but I am sure that many of the people who cheered Jesus on that day were shouting out their own version of, “Make Judea Great Again.”

But Matthew was not content with telling a story of Jesus coming into Jerusalem on an older donkey, on old ideas, traditions and an idealized past. He managed to slip in there that there was a new donkey coming into town as well. If Jesus was going to be Messiah, his messiahship was not going to be only based on old ideas or restorations of old kingdoms. Jesus was coming in the name of the God who was about to do something new.

## Old and New Together

And that makes me wonder where we are on this Palm Sunday. This is a Sunday that is full of old traditions. People have been waving palms and marching down aisles for a long time in this and in many other churches. I think it’s a day that brings a lot of nostalgia for an idealized past. And I love that nostalgia. I also feel it. But I’m also very thankful for Matthew who reminds us that Jesus also rode in on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

So, I think Matthew would challenge us to think about the young colt today. He also carried Jesus into town. What are some of the new ways in which Jesus is presenting himself to the world today?

You know, for centuries, the church developed ways of presenting the message of Jesus to the world. One of the ways they did it was by building beautiful buildings like this one. They would build beautiful buildings, ring beautiful bells, and people would just come in. I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but that strategy doesn’t quite work as well as it once did.

## The New Colts

So, what are the new colts? Does the church today need a social media strategy? I would absolutely say that it does. Do we need to find ways to bust out and learn how to be the church outside the building? No question. We are live streaming. We are engaging people right around the world with some of the media that we create. Yes, Jesus is riding a new Colt into town. But will we welcome these innovations with a waving of our palms today? Or will we just say, that sounds ridiculous? I suspect that Matthew wanted to challenge us with those kinds of thoughts in our reading this morning.