

He Rode Them Both

Hespeler, March 29, 2026 © Scott McAndless – Palm Sunday

Isaiah 50:4-9a, Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29, Matthew 21:1-11, Philippians 2:5-11

Christian tradition decided a long time ago that the first Gospel in the New Testament was written by a man named Matthew. This has made the Gospel particularly important to the church because it assumed that this was the same Matthew who was counted as one of the twelve disciples.

That meant that this Gospel was written by an eyewitness – someone who was there and saw almost all of it for himself. It certainly made it much more important than the Gospels of Mark or Luke, which were seen more as second-hand accounts.

Tradition and Text

But I want to stress that tradition is not the same thing as biblical text. The Gospel in the original manuscript was written anonymously, and the title, “According to Matthew,” was only added later.

Today, those who study the gospels generally agree that this Gospel was not written by somebody who was there. It is generally dated to about 90 AD, after the original Matthew would have died. It also never claims to be an eyewitness account and shows many indications that it was not written by someone who was there.

Copied from a Source

The most important indicator is that Matthew (and I am going to continue to call him Matthew because it’s the only name we have) copied many of his stories from one of his sources, which was the Gospel of Mark. Whole long passages are word-for-word the same. That can only be explained by somebody copying somebody else’s work. And why would you copy the story if you were there yourself?

Why, even the story of how Jesus called Levi to be his disciple is copied straight out of the Gospel of Mark with only one significant change: Matthew changes the name of the disciple from Matthew to Levi. According to tradition, this is supposed to be the author’s own story! So why wouldn’t he tell it in his own words?

So, the scholarly conclusion is that Matthew, whoever he was, wasn’t there. That doesn’t take anything away from the magnificence of this Gospel. Matthew did not need to have been there to do an amazing job of pulling together his sources and knowledge to write one of the most amazing pieces of literature in the ancient world.

The Desire to Be There

But man, you can tell from the way he wrote that he would have liked to have been there. He is always drawing from his sources to give extra details and pack them with as much meaning as possible. And I get that, don’t you? Wouldn’t you have loved to be there too?

Take the events that we celebrate this Sunday. Who among us wouldn’t want to have been in the throngs that turned out to welcome Jesus into Jerusalem? That’s why we still re-enact it year after year, to find all of the depths of what it was like to be there.

Matthew tried to do that too. As he wrote, he did his best to immerse himself in the scene. I think it must have gone something like this.



Mark's Palm Sunday Story

Matthew looked down at the scroll of what would someday come to be called the Gospel of Mark. It was unwound on the table before him. He had drawn from it again and again as he wrote his gospel up until this point. But now, the book was building up to the great climax of its story as Jesus arrived in Jerusalem before Passover.

As Matthew read through the account, he was captivated by the description of how Jesus had obtained a colt and rode it into town to the wild acclaim of the people.

Now, Matthew knew that the choice of a ride was not an accident. The particular beast had been chosen quite intentionally. Mark, the gospel writer, had gone out of his way to include that detail because he knew that it meant something. Jesus himself had likely made the choice because he too knew that a colt would make an important symbolic statement.

Making the Reference Clear

But Matthew was worried. He was afraid that his readers might not be as smart as he was. (This is, of course, an irrational fear that many writers suffer from.) His readers might not pick up right away that the colt was a reference to a particular scripture – a prophecy in the Book of Zechariah.

And so, Matthew decided, as he had done so many times before in his writing, that he needed to include the quote. This was not as easily done as you might think. He could not just Google the Book of Zechariah and then copy and paste. He could not even reach for a bound copy of what we would call the “Old Testament” on his shelf.

Finding a Copy

Any scroll was rare and expensive. Matthew had already blown most of his budget for this Gospel by commissioning someone to painstakingly copy out the Gospel of Mark by hand. So he could hardly afford a scroll of Zechariah. There were no public libraries. Even in synagogues, scrolls of the minor prophets were rare.

Matthew headed out to visit all of his wealthy and learned friends until he found one who had a precious copy of the Greek translation of the Book of Zechariah. Then he had to scroll through it (and this was in the days when scrolling was not just done with fingertips!) until he finally found the right passage.

He took out his tablet and carefully scratched the verses into the wax with a stylus: **“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.”**

A Problem

As he returned home, he kept mulling those words over in his mind. Matthew was certain – as many early Christians were certain – that just about everything that Jesus did, he did to fulfill the scriptures. That meant that the words of Zechariah predicted that, one day, Jesus would come and ride into Jerusalem just as Zechariah had said. So, if Matthew wanted to know exactly what it was like to be there, he could just read the description of the prophet.

But, as he looked down at the words he had scratched into the tablet, there was a problem. The prophet had said that Messiah would come riding, **“humble and mounted on a donkey, / and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”** How could that be, he wondered.

Hebrew Poetry

Ancient Prophets gave their oracles in poetry. And in Hebrew poetry, the lines don't end in rhyming

sounds. It was more like rhyming meanings. In one line, you would say something one way, and then in the next, you would say the same thing just using different words.

Matthew was a very smart man, but he probably didn't speak Hebrew. And nobody had ever explained to him how ancient Hebrew poetry worked. So, when he read that verse, he didn't realize that Zechariah had been writing in poetry and talking about the same donkey in both lines.

So, as far as Matthew could see, the prophecy said that the Messiah had to ride in on the backs of two beasts. And Matthew knew that the Old Testament was a reliable source for the events of the life of Jesus.

Fixing the Contradiction

There seemed to be a contradiction in his sources! Mark had clearly described Jesus riding in on the back of one donkey, but Matthew had just learned that there must have been two.

So what did Matthew do? Well, actually, it was the easiest problem to fix. Just because Mark had only mentioned one animal didn't mean that there *couldn't* have been more. So, when he sat down again to continue his Gospel, he just "corrected" Mark's little omission.

He *expanded* Jesus' instructions to the disciples when he sent them to get his ride. Surely Jesus must have actually said, **"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."** And so that is what he wrote in his papyrus scroll.

Corrected Version

And then, when the disciples return, Matthew *corrected* Mark's story to say, **"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."**

And, in between the instructions and the result, just so no one would miss the point he was making, Matthew wrote in these words: **"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.'"**

Did Matthew realize how much trouble he would cause for readers with his little *correction*? Did he anticipate that people would find the image of Jesus riding on the backs of two beasts at once so ridiculous that their imaginations refused to picture it altogether?

Not Seeing Matthew's Picture

The triumphal entry into Jerusalem is one of those stock images in Christian art. People have been painting and drawing it for centuries. But if you go through that history, you will not find images that depict Jesus riding on two animals.

What are we supposed to do with the fact that the Gospel of Matthew insists that Jesus rode into Jerusalem on the back of two donkeys? The reaction of the church over the years has been to ignore it or pretend that the detail is not there.

Some English translations have even obscured what the Gospel says, like, for example, the King James Version that translates the verse like this, **"And brought the ass, and the colt, and put on them their clothes, and they set him thereon."** That kind of obscures the fact that the original text says that Jesus was sitting on both animals.

Respecting the Writer

But I respect the writer of the gospel too much to pretend that he didn't write what I know he wrote.

If you are going to accept the whole of Scripture as being inspired by God, then you have to accept all of it, even the parts that seem to be based on a mistake, right?

It was a misunderstanding of the Old Testament text that led Matthew to tell it the way that he did. But if so, and if it was inspired, that simply means that it was God's will for Matthew to make this mistake and so tell the story this way. God, after all, can inspire scripture in any way that God wants!

Finding the Message

And that means that there is a message waiting for us in this odd detail in Matthew's story. What then are we supposed to learn by imagining Jesus straddling his legs over the backs of two beasts like a circus performer?

The message, to be sure, is that Jesus' coming is a fulfillment of scripture. Matthew makes that explicit. But there is surely more to it than that.

Young and Old Together

I think it means something that Matthew insists that Jesus didn't just ride the parent, but also the child. Surely there is a message for the church in that.

Sometimes we think that it should be enough to take care of the traditions of our foremothers and forefathers. Riding in on the back of our longstanding Presbyterian traditions alone should be enough to get people to turn out in droves and cheer us on in our mission.

But Matthew here reminds us that there has to be a role for a new generation, a younger donkey. We must be open to new ways of being. And that younger generation must not merely be there to spectate and cheer us on, but be allowed to carry this enterprise in new directions – maybe even down a few Jerusalem side streets. We need to respect the baby donkey enough to let it carry Jesus into the world in its own way.

Personal Message

And what personal message might there be for you in this odd part of the gospel story? Well, let me ask you. Which beast are you riding on your spiritual journey? Are you riding on the back of the steady, reliable forms of your faith that you have always counted on? Or are you perhaps always jumping on the back of the young donkey and riding after every new and trending idea and practice?

Most people tend to go in one direction or the other. Many of us believe that tradition should triumph over all, while others will get so lost chasing after the latest thing that they forget where they came from.

But what does Jesus, interpreted for us by Matthew, have to say to that? What if he is saying that the best way to proceed is to stretch your legs over both the donkey and her colt? What if that includes respecting the spiritual journeys of others and being willing to learn from them too?

Following Jesus

We enter into Jerusalem today with Jesus, "**humble and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.**" The road that lies before us will not be all palm branches and cheers. Following in the way of Jesus will include rejection, betrayal and taking up your cross to follow him.

But we will follow. We will gratefully climb onto the back of both beasts because we know what lies beyond the cross and the grave. But, for that, you'll have to stay tuned, as we continue the story next week.