

The Triumphal Entry: Jesus Approaches Jerusalem

Matthew 21:1-7

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Matthew 21 records the final arrival of Jesus in Jerusalem. This entry into Jerusalem is the climax of the section of this Gospel that spans six chapters, Matthew 19-25. They left Galilee in Matthew 19:1 to head to Jerusalem. This final destination was referenced as early as Luke 9:51, *“He was determined to go to Jerusalem.”*

All four Gospels include this account of Jesus’ arrival in Jerusalem (Mark 11:1-10; Luke 19:28-44; John 12:12-18). Jesus and His disciples were headed to Jerusalem because of the Passover. They had left Jericho (Matthew 20:29) and stayed in Ephraim in the wilderness roughly twelve miles northeast of Jerusalem. *“Therefore Jesus no longer continued to walk publicly among the Jews, but went away from there to the country near the wilderness, into a city called Ephraim; and there He stayed with the disciples”* (John 11:54). In the context of John, the Jews that Jesus could not be among were the Judeans who were plotting against Him.

Next, John describes Jesus as coming to Bethany six days before the Passover, according to John 12:1, *“Jesus, therefore, six days before the Passover, came to Bethany where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead.”* Matthew does not mention Bethany, which was on the Roman road between Jericho (Matthew 20:29) and Jerusalem, in these verses but does mention Bethany in 21:17. Bethany was likely the city that Jesus stayed in as He went back and forth to Jerusalem (cf. Matthew 21:17-18). Jesus was also headed to Jerusalem to present Himself as the Messiah of Israel, to fulfill prophecy and to be crucified (Matthew 20:18-19). These events were about to unfold over the next week, which Matthew reports in the remainder of his Gospel.

The arrival in Bethphage (21:1)

The town of Bethphage no longer exists and its exact location is unknown. However, it was *“at the Mount of Olives”* and near Bethany (Mark 11:1; Luke 19:29). It would have likely been at the southeast slope of the Mount of Olives, which is where Bethany was and where the road to Jerusalem would have passed by. Bethphage means “house of figs” as fig trees were prevalent in this region of Judea. Bethany and Bethphage were about seventeen miles from Jericho and there was over a 3,000 foot climb involved. From Bethany, there would be a 300 foot descent to Jerusalem as Bethany overlooked the city, about two miles away.

The area of the Mount of Olives will be involved with the return of Christ as He establishes the kingdom, *“Then the LORD will go forth and fight against those nations, as when He fights on a day of battle. In that day His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, which is in front of Jerusalem on the east; and the Mount of Olives will be split in its middle from east to west by a very large valley, so that half of the mountain will move toward the north and the other half toward the south”* (Zechariah 14:3-4). This is where the ascension of Christ occurred (Acts 1:9-12) and where the Lord will return.

The Gospel of John provides more detail of what took place when Jesus arrived at Bethphage and Bethany. He would visit the three siblings, Mary, Martha and Lazarus in Bethany. This visit took place on the Sabbath, six days before the Friday Passover, “Jesus, therefore, six days before the Passover, came to Bethany where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead” (John 12:1). Jesus and the disciples were served supper by Martha (John 12:2) and it was on this occasion that Mary anointed the feet of Jesus with very expensive perfume, to the chagrin of Judas Iscariot (John 12:3-8).

Likely, the following day after the Sabbath, the large crowd of Jews who were following Jesus learned He was at the house of Mary, Martha and Lazarus and they came to see Him, and also to see Lazarus, whom He had raised from the dead. Also, the chief priests were seeking to kill Lazarus, since his testimony of being raised from the dead was drawing more Jews to Jesus and away from the Jewish religious leaders.

John 12:12-15 records the events of the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem as happening *“on the next day”* (John 12:12). This would mean that the arrival of Jesus to Bethany six days before Passover was followed by the large crowds coming to see Jesus and Lazarus at Bethany on Sunday, and the events of the triumphal entry into Jerusalem occurred on Monday. Therefore, the religious tradition of “Palm Sunday” is not only never celebrated in the Scripture, and was not celebrated in the church for many centuries later, it does not even have the correct day of the week.

This timeline fits with the requirement of Exodus 12:2-6 that the sacrificial lambs for Passover were to be selected on the tenth day of the first month and kept until they were sacrificed on the fourteenth day. The tenth day was a Monday and the fourteenth day was the Passover on the Friday. This would mean that Jesus entered Jerusalem as the Lamb of God on the day that the Jewish people would have received their sacrificial lamb into their home. Jesus was the true sacrificial lamb, to be sacrificed for the actual sins of man.

This chronology would mean the following events of the cursing of the fig tree and the cleansing of the temple would take place on Tuesday, *“On the next day, when they had left Bethany...”* (Mark 11:11-19). Matthew condensed the story of the cursing of the fig tree into one event in Matthew 21:18-22. From Mark 11:12-14 and 11:19-25, we find that the fig tree was cursed the day before it was found to be withered as Jesus and the disciples returned to Jerusalem from Bethany.

This would leave the last day of the recorded events before the Thursday Passover preparation for Wednesday, with the testimony of the withered fig tree (Matthew 21), the interactions with the Sadducees and Pharisees (Matthew 22-23), and the Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24-25).

This then eliminates the problem known as “the silent Wednesday” with the traditional view of the final week of Christ’s life. If the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem took place on a Sunday, the necessary result is the Gospels record no events occurring on Wednesday, which is a difficult issue to reconcile in such an active week.

The instruction to the disciples (21:2-3)

Jesus gave an assignment to two of His disciples to go into the village of Bethphage and bring a donkey and her colt. These two disciples are not named in any of the three synoptic Gospels. One hint may be that Jesus sent Peter and John to prepare the Passover meal in Luke 22:8 but of course this does not determine who the two disciples were in this instance.

Up to this point, Jesus and the disciples had walked the approximate 80 miles from Galilee, as was the custom of the vast majority of those coming to Jerusalem for the Passover. Only the wealthy would have a donkey to ride. The reason for the donkey and the colt to be obtained by the disciples was in order to specifically fulfill the prophecy that we will see referenced in 21:5.

There is no mention of any money exchanged to procure the donkey. Matthew only records what the disciples are to say if anyone asks, but Luke 19:33-34 describes the owners being aware the animals were being taken, *“As they were untying the colt, its owners said to them, ‘Why are you untying the colt?’ They said, ‘The Lord has need of it.’”* Also, Mark 11:5-6 notes that the disciples were given permission to take them, *“Some of the bystanders were saying to them, ‘What are you doing, untying the colt?’ They spoke to them just as Jesus had told them, and they gave them permission.”*

Matthew only reported the instructions of Jesus to the disciples to *“Go into the village opposite you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied there and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to Me. If anyone says anything to you, you shall say, ‘The Lord has need of them,’ and immediately he will send them.”* The other two synoptic Gospels record what occurred after He sent them, *“So those who were sent went away and found it just as He had told them”* (Luke 19:32). Matthew’s account focused more on the words of Jesus than on the details of what transpired.

Interestingly, Jesus uses the term *“Lord”* to refer to Himself when saying *“If anyone says anything to you, you shall say, ‘The Lord has need of them,’ and immediately he will send them.* While this could refer to God the Father, in this context it is simpler to view Jesus as using this term to refer to Himself. As He is nearing the end of His ministry on earth, He is increasingly willing to provide more revelation about Himself.

The fulfillment of prophecy (21:4-5)

There is a possibility, although unlikely, that 21:4-5 was spoken by Jesus, rather than the writing of Matthew about this event. There are no quotation marks, or punctuation in the original Greek text. Yet from the phrasing of *“This took place”* leads to English translations ascribing these words to Matthew.

This fulfillment is one of many ways that Jesus fulfilled prophecy. Matthew in particular notes the fulfillment of prophecy in his Gospel more than any other. Over a dozen times, Matthew includes a specific comment that identifies that something happened in order to fulfill what was spoken through the prophets (Matthew 1:22; 2:15, 17, 23; 3:15; 4:14; 8:17; 12:17; 13:14, 35; 21:4; 26:54, 56; 27:9). The fulfillment of prophecy is a fundamental and essential proof that Jesus is that Messiah.

In this case, Jesus arranged the events in order to fulfill this prophecy. Many prophecies were not like this. Some prophecies were fulfilled by the determination of God alone, such as Jesus being born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2), Jesus being from the tribe of Judah (Genesis 49:10), or Jesus’ resurrection (Psalm 16:9-11). Other prophecies were fulfilled by the acts of other people who were against Jesus, such as that Jesus would be rejected by men (Isaiah 53:3), Jesus would be crucified (Psalm 22:16), and Jesus would be betrayed for thirty pieces of silver (Zechariah 11:12-13), or even His friends, such as Jesus being abandoned by the disciples (Psalm 41:9).

In this case, the prophecy referenced in Matthew 21:4-5 was directly fulfilled by the desire of Jesus. He orchestrated the entire acquisition of the donkey that He would ride into the city of Jerusalem. Other prophecies like this include Jesus teaching in parables (Psalm 78:1-2) and Jesus remaining quiet before His accusers (Psalm 38:12-13).

The prophecy referenced in Matthew 21:4-5 is derived from two different places in the Old Testament. The first line of this quotation is from Isaiah 62:11, *“Say to the daughter of Zion.”* The remaining three verses are quoted from Zechariah 9:9, *“Behold your King is coming to you, gentle, and mounted on a donkey, even on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.”*

Not only does the text from Zechariah make up the most of the quotation, it also makes up the most significant part of the prophecy, namely what would be done. Therefore, when Jesus gave this fulfillment and referenced one prophet, He was speaking of Zechariah. When we look at the entirety of Zechariah 9:9, we see the phrase *“daughter of Zion,”* so while Matthew 21:5 does quote Isaiah 62:11, it also alludes to Zechariah 9:9.

Zion is a poetical reference to the city of Jerusalem in well over one hundred Old Testament references (e.g. 1 Kings 8:1; cf. Hebrews 12:22). Mount Zion is the highest hill above the city, and features prominently in its geography. Zion is often used in the context of the rule of the Messiah in the kingdom on earth and Jesus called Jerusalem *“the city of the great King”* in quoting Isaiah 66:1 as recorded in Matthew 5:35. The phrase *“daughter of Zion”* therefore refers to the residents of Jerusalem, which was the Messiah’s city.

The full text of Zechariah 9:9 is, *“Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout in triumph, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; He is just and endowed with salvation, Humble, and mounted on a donkey, Even on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”*

When we compare Zechariah 9:9 with what Jesus quoted in Matthew 25:5, we notice the middle phrase of Zechariah 9:9 was omitted, *“He is just and endowed with salvation.”* Given the context of Zechariah 9 where the Messiah brings national salvation to Israel, it is apparent that Jesus left that phrase out of His quotation because He was not bringing national salvation to Israel with the coming kingdom. He was coming to be rejected by Israel, giving His life as a ransom for many. The salvation of Israel as a nation awaits the kingdom of God and His second coming.

Matthew 21:5 is the first of seven references to the fulfillment of what Zechariah had prophesied over the remainder of this Gospel. Matthew 21:12-13 quotes Zechariah 14:21; Matthew 26:15-16 alludes to Zechariah 11:12; Matthew 26:26-29 alludes to Zechariah 9:11; Matthew 26:31 quotes Zechariah 13:7; Matthew 27:9-10 quotes Zechariah 11:12-13; and Matthew 27:51-54 alludes to Zechariah 14:4-5.

The reason that Jesus sent the disciples to procure a donkey was not only to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet, but also to demonstrate His humility. The rulers of Israel rode donkeys (Judges 5:10; 1 Kings 1:33). Donkeys were ridden by rulers during times of peace because they are easier to ride, safer to ride, and the ride is smoother. In contrast, rulers rode horses in time of war, as they are faster.

The significance of the donkey is that it supports the imagery of the king of the Jews entering the capital city of Jerusalem. Jesus, in His first advent, came peacefully, *"I am gentle and humble in heart"* (Matthew 11:29). In the second coming of Christ, Jesus will come on a horse, not a donkey, *"And I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse, and He who sat on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and wages war"* (Revelation 19:11).

The fulfillment of the instruction (20:6-7)

Matthew summarized the work of the disciples following Jesus' instruction to them. Mark and Luke include the story of the owner asking the question *"why are you untying the colt"* (Luke 18:33; cf. Mark 11:3), just as Jesus had told them someone may ask (Luke 18:31; cf. Mark 11:5-6). The accounts of the other three Gospels only mention the colt, not its mother. Matthew includes the mother in order to show the exact fulfillment of Scripture that included a donkey and a colt. Matthew's interest was in the fulfillment of the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9, more than he was concerned about reporting the details of the acquisition of the animals.

The disciples brought both the colt and donkey and laid their coats on both animals. This was done to give Jesus something of a saddle to ride in more comfort. He was then able to choose which animal He wished to ride.

Mark 11:7 and Luke 18:35 say that Jesus rode on the colt, not the mother of the colt. This young male donkey had never been ridden before, according to Mark 11:2 and Luke 18:30, but Jesus' power would be displayed by riding this colt through an excited crowd. The crowds would not be aware of this remarkable display of authority by Jesus, but the two disciples who acquired the animals certainly did. So often, even those praising the Lord are oblivious to all of the remarkable power of the One they are honoring.

Conclusion

Matthew 21 begins the movement of Jesus into Jerusalem for the final time before His death by preparing for His approach to the city. After leaving Galilee and passing through Jericho, Jesus established a base for Himself and His disciples at the base of the Mount of Olives where He would be able to go into the city daily over the coming few days.

Jesus took deliberate steps to plan His entry into Jerusalem. His plan to ride on a colt as He entered the city was to fulfil the prophecy from the Old Testament book of Zechariah. The fulfillment of prophecy by Jesus is a major theme of Matthew and Jesus planned this Messianic fulfillment in the case.

The manner of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem also served to demonstrate His royal standing as the king of the Jews by coming in peace upon a donkey. This was the very way that Solomon was established as the successor to the throne of David in 1 Kings 1:33-34, *"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. Let Zadok the priest and Nathan the prophet anoint him there as king over Israel, and blow the trumpet and say, 'Long live King Solomon!'"*

Therefore, Jesus fulfilled Old Testament prophecy and carefully prepared for His climactic final entry into Jerusalem prior to His death. He would be acclaimed as the *"Son of David"* by the crowd that was following Him as the rightful heir to the throne of David. The Messiah of Israel would be rejected by the Jews to become the sacrificial lamb for the sin of man, an act of service that was planned by God from the beginning. *"The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many"* (Matthew 20:28).