

Matthew 21:1-22: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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- [0 : 0 0] Matthew chapter 21 verses 1 to 22 Now when they drew near to Jerusalem and came to Bethphage, to the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, Go into the village in front 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, you shall say, The Lord needs them, and he will send them at once. This took place to fulfil what was spoken by the prophet, saying, Say to the daughter of Zion, Behold, your king is coming to you, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.
- The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them. They brought the donkey and the colt and put on them their cloaks, and he sat on them. Most of the crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road.
- And the crowds that went before him and that followed him were shouting, Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest! When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up, saying, Who is this?
- And the crowd said, This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth of Galilee. And Jesus entered the temple, and drove out all who sold and bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers, and the seats of those who sold pigeons.
- [1 : 2 7] He said to them, It is written, My house shall be called a house of prayer, but you make it a den of robbers. And the blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he healed them.
- But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that he did, and the children crying out in the temple, Hosanna to the Son of David! They were indignant, and they said to him, Do you hear what these are saying?
- And Jesus said to them, Yes. Have you never read, Out of the mouth of infants and nursing babes you have prepared praise? And leaving them, he went out of the city to Bethany, and lodged there.
- In the morning, as he was returning to the city, he became hungry. And seeing a fig tree by the wayside, he went to it, and found nothing on it but only leaves. And he said to it, May no fruit ever come from you again.
- And the fig tree withered at once. When the disciples saw it, they marveled, saying, How did the fig tree wither at once? And Jesus answered them, Truly I say to you, If you have faith, and do not doubt, you will not only do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, Be taken up and thrown into the sea, it will happen.
- [2 : 4 6] And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith. As Jesus draws near to Jerusalem in Matthew chapter 21, he arrives at the Mount of Olives at Bethphage, and sends two of his disciples ahead of them to find a donkey and a colt, and to untie them and bring them to him.

For such a lowly beast of burden, it's interesting how significant a role the donkey plays in the history of Israel's kingdom. It seldom is the centre of the story, but it does play a common role within the story of the kingdom, at pivotal historical moments in its establishment and in prophecies concerning it.

At times it serves to reveal or to highlight identities and destinies of key protagonists, and at other points, it plays a part in setting in motion key events.

The story of the kingdom begins with Saul searching for the donkeys of his father. In Genesis chapter 49, verses 10 to 11, Jacob prophesies concerning the tribe of Judah, speaking about binding the fold to his vine, the donkey's colt to the choice vine, connecting the tribe of Judah with the donkey from the very beginning of its story.

As already mentioned, the story of Saul focuses upon a quest for donkeys, and he is told, as one of the first signs of the kingdom, that the donkeys have been found. And the whole episode concerning Saul ends with a conversation with his uncle about the lost donkeys, in 1 Samuel chapter 10, verse 14 to 16.

[4 : 21] And there's an association with donkeys and mules and rule and kingship. We first see this in Genesis chapter 49. It's also seen in the book of Judges, Judges chapter 5, verse 10, verse 4 of chapter 10, and verse 14 of chapter 12.

When David is sent to Saul by Jesse, he is sent with a donkey and with other signs associated with the kingdom, the signs that Saul himself was given in chapter 10.

In 1 Samuel chapter 16, verses 1 and 2, David escapes from Jerusalem after his son Absalom's coup, and Zeba brings two donkeys for the king's household to ride upon.

And there's an ironic twist, as Absalom the pretender ends up hung from a terebinth tree by his long hair when his mule goes beneath it. The association between Davidic rulers and donkeys or mules is seen most markedly in 1 Kings chapter 1, verses 28 to 40.

And in that chapter, the fraught situation of royal succession and who's going to take David's throne when he dies is resolved in large part as Solomon is distinguished as the true heir to the throne through a triumphal entry into Jerusalem on King David's own mule.

[5 : 35] So the donkey or the mule, or the king's steed, is associated with peaceful rule, while the horse is an animal of war. There's a different sort of triumphal entry that we see in the case of Jehu, who's secretly anointed by Elisha and goes over a carpet of people's garments that they have stretched out before him in 2 Kings chapter 9, verses 1 to 13.

Jehu, however, is not a meek ruler riding on a donkey. He's a furious and bloody charioteer and horseman. He kills Joram of Israel and Ahaziah of Judah. He tramples Jezebel under his horse's feet as he enters Jezreel.

And then in chapter 10, verses 18 to 28, he cleanses the temple of Baal in the most bloody of manners. When the prophet Zechariah foretells the coming of a new king to restore the people's fortunes, he's identified by his riding of a cult, the foal of a donkey.

And the character of his rule is distinguished from that of the warmongering regents with their royal charges. In Zechariah chapter 9, verses 9 to 10, Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion.

Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem. Behold, your king is coming to you, righteous and having salvation as he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

[6 : 53] I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem, and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall speak peace to the nations. His rule shall be from sea to sea and from the river to the ends of the earth.

This is a powerful prophecy, and it's a prophecy whose words ring within this resonance chamber of all these references to the king and his donkeys and the way in which rule is demonstrated through horses, donkeys and mules and other symbolic beasts.

This recalls the blessing of Jacob over his son Judah and some of the most glorious and tragic episodes in Israel's history. The coming king is the true bearer of Judah's scepter.

He's the one who will establish the kingdom. He's greater than Saul, who sought for the donkeys, and he's the true son of David. He will realize the unfulfilled promise of Solomon, who fell short of his name in calling to be the prince of peace.

His coming will not be like that of the violent Jehu. The chariot and the horse and the conflicts to which they belong will be cut off, and the nations will be granted a gentle word of peace.

[8 : 01] And so Christ comes into the city in a way that's deeply symbolic. This is an action that's carefully considered. Jesus is engaging in a symbolic action that displays kingship, but kingship of a very particular type.

And he comes into the city and goes to the temple. His action in the temple interrupts the affairs of the temple. He drives people out. He overturns tables. And there are lots of allusions to scripture in these sections.

He speaks about the way in which a house of prayer has been made into a den of thieves, a den of robbers. And what does he mean by this? A robber's den is a place to retreat for brigands to protect themselves from the consequences of their violence.

It's a place of safety and security and refuge for brigands. And Jesus is teaching that for the Jews of his day, the temple has become just that.

It's become a place to claim refuge from the consequences of their sins. It's like the people of Jeremiah's day. The temple, the temple, the temple of the Lord are these. They take confidence in the fact that they have this building.

[9 : 07] It's a sort of talismanic security against the judgment of God. And yet, God is going to come to the temple. He's going to inspect his temple and he's going to purge it.

The promise of Malachi is going to come to pass. The Lord whom you seek is suddenly going to come to his temple and he's going to purge and test. He's going to come to the threshing floor, which is associated with the temple.

And he's going to clean it and cleanse it. And Christ comes as foretold by John the Baptist. Now, this is a cleansing in preparation for a later judgment.

There's a judgment upon the temple that will fall in AD 70. And this prepares for that. It's supposed to be a house of prayer. It's supposed to be a place of prayer for all nations.

That's what it was originally established to be by Solomon. And now it has failed in that regard. It's actually serving the exact opposite purpose. A place not of holiness, but a place to excuse wickedness.

[10 : 07] A place to shield people from the consequences of their wickedness. Jesus cleanses the temple and then the blind and the lame come to him in the temple. We've already discussed themes of entry into Jerusalem in conquest and victory and triumph.

Something like the story of Solomon as he's about to be established as king or the story of Jehu as he goes into Jezreel with judgment. And Jehu cleanses the temple of Baal and in a very bloody way.

Jesus is coming into the temple and he's coming in in a way that maybe reminds us of some other stories. And those reminders can be given to us in the way that he treats the blind and the lame.

In 2 Samuel chapter 5, David conquers Jerusalem and the king and his men went up to Jerusalem against the Jebusites, the inhabitants of the land, who said to David, You will not come in here, but the blind and the lame will ward you off, thinking David cannot come in here.

[11:20] Therefore it is said, the blind and the lame shall not come into the house. The taunt of the Jebusites concerning the blind and the lame is a crucial part of the story of David's original conquest of Jerusalem.

As we noted earlier in 2 Samuel 16, verse 1, Ziba brings two donkeys to David for himself and his household. He brings the two donkeys to David in a similar location as the two disciples find them.

You can also see it as a reversal of God's movement out of Jerusalem in Ezekiel chapter 8 to 11. Once again, children epitomise the true behaviour and character of the kingdom.

In Mark's account, it frames Jesus' action within the temple. The fig tree represents Israel and its leaders and their failure to produce fruit. And the reference to the mountain should also be considered in this context.

It's going to be part of this new order. The old mountains are going to be removed and put out of place and the new world is going to be established. No longer will they worship upon that mountain or upon some mountain up in Samaria, but God's worship will occur all over the world.

[13 : 42] How might the laws for a leprous house in the book of Leviticus help us to understand Jesus' action within the temple?