

Who is this Man?

Matthew 21:1-11; Ps 118:1-2, 19-29

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Through the three years of his ministry, Jesus generally did not say who he was. This has been called the Messianic secret in studies of Mark's gospel, where the identity of Jesus is at first known only the demons, then gradually is realised by his followers and others. As he got towards the end of his ministry, he seemed to become more direct. With this in mind, let's look at the ride into Jerusalem named the Triumphal Entry. Jesus normally walked everywhere but this time he chose to ride – why?

It was deliberate claim; it was fulfilling a prophecy. Matthew is keen that we understand when Jesus fulfilled prophecies of the Messiah. He says here in verse 5,

"Say to the Daughter of Zion, 'See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'"

However, this is a combination of two Old Testament verses. "Say to the Daughter of Zion" occurs only in Isaiah 62:11:

The LORD has made proclamation to the ends of the earth: "Say to the Daughter of Zion, 'See, your Saviour comes! See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him.'"

The word Saviour is in Hebrew *yeshua* which David Stern says in the "Jewish New Testament Commentary" is the same word as *Yeshua* – the original, Hebrew of Jesus. He writes, "Salvation is a person and not just any person, but God – since a person who is salvation must be God."¹

Matthew, then took that part of Isaiah 62 and combined it with Zechariah 9:9,

See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

Here it is the king who comes. Matthew is indicating that the King, salvation, Jesus, God are all the same person.

We all remember that the people spread their cloaks on the ground before him – this was an acknowledgement of royalty – it is a custom described in the Old Testament.² For instance, when Jehu is proclaimed king of Israel in 2 Kings, they spread their cloaks on the steps before him and announced that he was their king.

With Jesus, they called him "Son of David" which was a royal title – the Messiah was to be a descendent of King David who would rule with justice.

The crowd were proclaiming him as Messiah and King.

He rode into Jerusalem, the City of the Great King on a donkey not a warhorse. Donkeys are beasts of burden, with short legs and short tempers. Horses have speed and power.

Normally kings entered cities on a horse as conqueror. Contrast that with Jesus' entry. We see there a deliverer rather than a conqueror; a king of peace rather than a warlord.

¹ Stern D.H., 1995, *The Jewish New Testament Commentary*, Jewish New Testament Publications Inc., Clarksville, Maryland, page 61

² 2 Kings 9:13

It was not even a donkey but the foal of a donkey. Mark and Luke make it clear that it was the foal he rode – the weaker of the two animals and one which had never been ridden before – a combination of his humility while demonstrating his mastery of nature.

By riding into Jerusalem he claimed the title of King.

In December 1917, Jerusalem was captured from the Ottoman Empire. The British General, Allenby, chose to walk into Jerusalem. General Allenby was a born-again believer, he entered Jerusalem on foot because he said, “Only one Person has the right to ride into Jerusalem.”

The people accorded Jesus the title of king and also of prophet. They said of him, “This Jesus the prophet from Nazareth.”³

Psalm 118

As Jesus advances towards Jerusalem, the people sing Psalm 118, which is a thoroughly Messianic psalm. It is about a king delivering Israel from foreigners.

As in the psalm they take up palm branches and strew them before him. “With boughs in hand, join in the festal procession up to the horns of the altar.” Palm branches were a sign of celebration but also of Jewish nationalism and victory. This was taking on political overtones!

As in the psalm, they call out “Hosanna – Save us now. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.” The one who comes in the name of the Lord God, comes with the power and authority of the Lord. This is heady stuff.

The psalm speaking of festal procession up to the horns of the altar. It is headed for the temple and we know from the following verses, Jesus went straight to the temple and cleared it of traders.

Golden Gate

The route Jesus followed into Jerusalem from Bethany was over the Mount of Olives across the Kidron Valley and into the city. The Eastern Gate was the main entrance into the Temple area. It faced towards the Mount of Olives. It was the gate that Jesus entered on a humble donkey in His triumphal entry. Once again, Psalm 118 mentions opening the gate to go into the temple:

Ps 118:19-20 Open for me the gates of righteousness; I will enter and give thanks to the LORD. This is the gate of the LORD through which the righteous may enter.

According to Jewish tradition the Messiah will enter Jerusalem from the east. The gate has a special holiness; legend has it that the Shekinah (Divine Presence) used to appear through this gate and will appear again, and that in the meantime it must be left untouched. This would be based on Ezekiel seeing the glory of the Lord enter the temple through the East Gate.⁴

Ezekiel had a vision of a new temple around 600BC. He wrote in Ezekiel 44:1-2:

Then the man brought me back to the outer gate of the sanctuary, the one facing east, and it was shut. The LORD said to me, "This gate is to remain shut. It must not be opened; no-one may enter through it. It is to remain shut because the LORD, the God of Israel, has entered through it.

It is interesting that this gate is the only one of the eight gates of today's Jerusalem that is sealed. The Arabs believe that since the Jews expect that Messiah would come through this gate they would try to prevent any possibility of His return, so in 1530 they walled it up with great stones and established a cemetery in front of it thinking that the Jewish Messiah could not set foot in a cemetery and therefore would not be able to come. This was to stop the Jewish Messiah from coming into Jerusalem – however they were about 1500 years too late – he had long since come. The gate he came through was destroyed in 70AD by the Romans. Ezekiel's prophecy had also been fulfilled on the first Palm Sunday.

The Messiah had gone in through the East Gate into the temple - they could hardly have realised that this procession was indeed to the altar in the sense that Jesus would offer himself for the sins of the world on the Friday to come.

³ V11

⁴ Ezekiel 43:4

Leaders of the Jews desiring to kill him

I have been reading John's gospel in my personal devotions recently. In the accounts in chapter 7 and chapter 11, the raising of Lazarus, I have been struck by the reactions of the Jewish leaders.

7:1 After this, Jesus went around in Galilee, purposely staying away from Judea because the Jews there were waiting to take his life.

7:32 The Pharisees heard the crowd whispering [that he was the Messiah]. Then the chief priests and the Pharisees sent temple guards to arrest him.

After the raising of Lazarus to life again, we read the reaction of the leaders:

John 11:47-53 Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin. "What are we accomplishing?" they asked. "Here is this man performing many miraculous signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation." Then one of them, named Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, spoke up, "You know nothing at all! You do not realise that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish." He did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one. So from that day on they plotted to take his life.

Not much time had passed between the raising of Lazarus and the triumphal entry. Jesus had withdrawn to a remote village and people were wondering whether he would come to the Passover Feast.

John 11:56-57 They kept looking for Jesus, and as they stood in the temple area they asked one another, "What do you think? Isn't he coming to the Feast at all?" But the chief priests and Pharisees had given orders that if anyone found out where Jesus was, he should report it so that they might arrest him.

Then we learn that the leaders wanted to kill off Lazarus too because he was an embarrassment to their position:

John 12:10-11 So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well, for on account of him many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and putting their faith in him.

I read recently a suggested explanation for the absence of the Lazarus account from Matthew, Mark and Luke. Richard Bauckham offers the idea that Lazarus was indeed an embarrassment and a threat to the authorities and his life would continue to be in danger. Therefore, to protect him, the earlier gospels omitted the story. By the time John wrote his gospel, if Lazarus had now died, it would be safe to tell the story.

When John recounts the Triumphal Entry he makes the link between the raising of Lazarus and the crowd's enthusiasm:

John 12:17-19 Now the crowd that was with him when he called Lazarus from the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to spread the word. Many people, because they had heard that he had given this miraculous sign, went out to meet him. So the Pharisees said to one another, "See, this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after him!"

Claims to be king are dangerous in the political sphere. These actions of Jesus and the reaction of the crowd were putting him into danger both because of the risk of leaders losing power and because if he were not the Messiah, then his actions and words were blasphemous which carried a death penalty.

Conclusion

Jesus entered Jerusalem as the King not to establish an earthly monarchy over them, but to bring peace between God and humanity through his own death.

This was the day of publicly laying claim to his position. This was quite a day! This is quite a man!

What do you make of this man Jesus? Do you hear his claims of kingship over your heart?

Do you see that if his words are taken seriously they drive us to the conclusion that he is God incarnate?

What then is your response to this King who would rule those who respond and lead them into harmony between God and man?

What is your response to this God?