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## **CERTIFICATE COURSE IN THE FOUR GOSPELS**

### **UNIT 12: THE TRIUMPHAL ENTRY**

The story of the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem in his final week is one of the few incidents in the life of Christ which appears in all four gospel accounts (Matthew 21:1–17; Mark 11:1–11; Luke 19:29–40; John 12:12–19). This is especially significant as John – as we have seen in this course – frequently omits all but the most important events covered in the other gospels. Evidently John, as well as the other gospel writers, considered the triumphal entry of the utmost significance. But the fullest account is found in Matthew’s Gospel, and we will use it as the base of our study of this event.

#### **BACKGROUND AND PERSPECTIVES:**

To understand the triumphal entry fully, we must notice the various details we are given in regard to it:

As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, “Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, say that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away.” This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet: “Say to Daughter Zion, ‘See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.’” The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. They brought the donkey and the colt and placed their cloaks on them for Jesus to sit on. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” “Hosanna in the highest heaven!” (Matthew 21:1–9).

A key aspect to understanding this event in its broader biblical context is found in an Old Testament parallel that would have been in the minds of many Jews who witnessed Jesus’ return to Jerusalem. The book of 1 Kings records the coronation of King Solomon – the first of the rulers who would sit on King David’s throne as a physical type of the promised descendant of David who would rule forever (Isaiah 9:1–7). This coronation occurred in difficult times. One of David’s other sons, Adonijah, wanted the position promised to Solomon (1 Kings 1:5–10) and had developed a relationship with the military and religious powers of that time – General Joab and the priestly leader Abiathar – in order to gain that power.

But David placed his true heir, Solomon, on a mule or donkey (the significance of which we will soon see) and had him ride down across the Kidron Valley and into Jerusalem, where he was crowned by the loyal priest Zadok and the prophet Nathan. This entry of Solomon into Jerusalem on a mule was accompanied by the people celebrating God’s king with loud cheers and exclamations: “And all the people went up after him, playing pipes and rejoicing greatly, so that the ground shook with the sound” (1 Kings 1:40).

The event not only celebrated the coronation of the descendant of David, but also exposed the priestly leader Abiathar and the religious leaders who followed him, and made it clear that that General Joab and his military power (the behind-the-scenes king-maker) was not the true power in control of the royal destiny. Rather than the military and religious establishment's choice in his war chariot (1 Kings 1:5), it was the one who rode humbly on a donkey who was the true son of David who would be king.

The parallels between this Old Testament story and the New Testament triumphal entry of Jesus – the One who was greater than Solomon (Matthew 12:42) – into Jerusalem are clear. Jesus' triumphal procession also showed his superiority and legitimacy over Pilate's Roman military power and its choice of King Herod – also supported by the corrupt religious leaders of Jesus' day. And these obvious parallels are even further heightened by an Old Testament prophecy relating to Jesus in the book of Zechariah:

Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem!  
See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious,  
lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. (Zechariah 9:9)

Each of the gospel writers quotes part of this prophecy, and it is instructive to compare the parts of the text they select. As we saw above, Matthew (Matthew 21:5) stresses Jesus' peaceful coming ("gentle and riding on a donkey") and omits the reference to him being "righteous and victorious." Mark, in his account (Mark 11:9–10) does not mention the donkey but stresses the rejoicing of the people of Zion at the coming kingdom of David. Luke (Luke 19:38) also chooses to stress the peaceful nature of the King and the praise of the people that almost echo the words of the angelic chorus he recorded in his account of the birth of Jesus (Luke 2:14). John (John 12:13–15) also combines the praise of the people and the prophetic mention of the peaceful King on a young donkey.

Although the gospel accounts differ in various circumstantial details, they fully agree on the core of the story: that at the beginning of the final week of his life Jesus rode into Jerusalem seated on a donkey and was hailed by the crowds who had come to Jerusalem to celebrate the annual Passover Feast. Most importantly, three of the gospel accounts – Matthew, Luke, and John – stress the peaceful nature of Jesus' prophesied triumphal entry.

## **UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT:**

Although the accounts of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem are brief, readers of the gospels frequently have questions about them. At the beginning of the story, for example, Matthew tells us how Jesus instructed two of his disciples to go to a nearby home where they would find a donkey and its colt and to bring them to him. He told the disciples that if anyone challenged them, they were to say "The Lord needs them" (Matthew 21:1–3). The disciples did this – explaining to the donkey's owners what Jesus had told them.

Some find this puzzling – that people would simply let the animal be taken like this, but Jesus was, in effect, invoking the ancient principle of *angaria* (from a Babylonian word meaning "mounted messenger") by which kings, rulers and other individuals with official responsibilities could requisition property for official use. *Angaria* was utilized in the earliest postal systems in the ancient Persian, Greek and later Roman cultures where an animal could be "requisitioned" from its owner to carry the mail on the next stage of its multiple-staged journey, somewhat equivalent to the "Pony Express" of the American frontier.

In the Judea of Jesus' day, under Roman rule, animals could be commandeered in this way for the emperor's service, and the right was also expanded to include the needs of the king and even magistrates and rabbis. As a respected rabbi, Jesus would have qualified for this privilege.

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*In the biblical world, leaders often rode horses ... if they rode to war, but donkeys or mules might be used if they wanted to stress that they came in peace.*

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But why was a donkey needed – why was it important for Jesus to ride into Jerusalem on a donkey rather than a horse, as most rulers would? In the biblical world, leaders often rode horses or in chariots, if they rode to war, but donkeys or mules might be used if they wanted to stress that they came in peace. That is doubtless why 1 Kings 1:33 mentions Solomon riding a mule (a half-donkey) on the day he was crowned as the new king of Israel – to show the people that he came in peace despite his brother’s attempt to claim the throne. This also fits the mention in Zechariah 9:9 of the prophesied King who would be “righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey.”

In fact, in the next verse, Zechariah highlights this aspect of the peace to be instituted by the coming King: “I will take away the chariots from Ephraim and the warhorses from Jerusalem, and the battle bow will be broken. He will proclaim peace to the nations. His rule will extend from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth” (Zechariah 9:10). Although part of this prophecy clearly speaks of Christ’s second coming and kingdom, Jesus’ first triumphal entry prefigured the fact that he would be a ruler of peace. That is why three of the four gospel accounts stress the aspect of peace in their description of Jesus’ triumphal entry. And it is no stretch of the imagination to apply Zechariah’s prophecy to Jesus. We read in Mark 14:27 that Jesus applied another prophecy to himself from just a few chapters later in the same book when he told the disciples that they would all desert him. “You will all fall away,” Jesus told them, quoting Zechariah 13:7, “for it is written: ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.’”

Most Jews would have known Zechariah’s messianic prophecy regarding the kingly figure riding on a donkey. That is why the crowds hailed Jesus as their King, shouting, “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” (Matthew 21:9) – they acknowledged him as the true Davidic Messiah and King. But this was not the only prophecy fulfilled in this great event. The words of the crowds who welcomed Jesus in this triumphal entry are important. Luke tells us that they quoted from the great messianic Psalm 118 – which is why the Pharisees attempted to silence them (Luke 19:38–39).

This is the psalm that contains the statement quoted by Jesus of himself: “The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone” (Psalm 118:22), and it also contains clear references to the triumphal entry of the Messiah. “I look in triumph on my enemies” (Psalm 118:7); “I will not die but live, and will proclaim what the Lord has done” (Psalm 118:17); “Open for me the gates of the righteous; I will enter and give thanks to the Lord” (Psalm 118:19); “Save us” – the Hebrew *hosha-ana* “hosanna” signifying praise and salvation – that was chanted by the crowds (Psalm 118:25); “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. From the house of the Lord we bless you. The Lord is God, and he has made his light shine on us. With boughs in hand, join in the festal procession up to the horns of the altar” (Psalm 118:26–27).

Although the gospel writers only cite a few of the words from Psalm 118, they knew their readers would see that the psalm is in fact a full prophetic description of Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem, and Matthew, Mark, and Luke all show that Jesus proceeded along his triumphal entry up to the temple – the very location at which Psalm 118 ends.

When Matthew tells us “When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred” by this event (Matthew 21:10), we should realize the magnitude of what occurred. Estimates of the population of the city – including ancient ones from that time – range from hundreds of thousands to two and a half million people being present for festivals (see Note 1).

## CONCEPTS AND APPLICATIONS:

Jesus clearly rejected the self-elevating nature of the triumphal entries that were part of coronation ceremonies and victory celebrations in the cultures of his time, and he did this by riding humbly into Jerusalem on a young donkey – in contrast to the great war-horses of earthly kings and conquerors. At the same time he perfectly fulfilled the triumphant prophecies of Zechariah 9 and Psalm 118 in detail. As we have seen, it was important that he rode on a donkey – Zechariah’s prediction uses three words for mule or donkey in a single verse (Zechariah 9:9) as if to stress the great importance of this aspect of the prophecy. Symbolically, Christ’s journey with a donkey toward his own sacrifice may even harken back to the foreshadowing of a human father – Abraham – leading his only son – Isaac – and a donkey to the sacrifice God had commanded (Genesis 22:1–3). But Jesus’ triumphal entry certainly fulfilled a number of important roles in showing him as:

1. **The Promised King:** The triumphal entry of Jesus was a preliminary fulfillment of the prophecies of Zechariah 9 and Psalm 118 that established his rightful place as the promised Messianic King.
2. **The Humble Servant:** The details of the triumphal event demonstrated the humble and peaceful nature of Jesus’ first coming. Just as he came as a lowly servant on a donkey, not a royal steed; not in royal robes, but in the clothes of the common people; Jesus came not to conquer by force as earthly kings, but by love, and his own sacrifice.
3. **The Sacrificial Lamb:** On the tenth day of the month of Nisan the lambs that were being kept in the fields around Jerusalem were brought into the city in preparation for the Passover Feast (Exodus 12:1–3, 6). The gospels show this was the day the triumphal entry occurred – therefore, and fittingly, Jesus entered Jerusalem at the same time as the Passover lambs were being brought into the city.
4. **The Lord of Israel:** Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem prefigured his second coming. In his triumphal entry he came down from the Mount of Olives (Matthew 21:1) on Jerusalem’s eastern side, crossed the Kidron Valley and entered the city (just as Solomon had crossed the Kidron Valley when he entered Jerusalem as its new king nearly a thousand years earlier – 1 Kings 1:35, 43–46). The book of Zechariah prophesies that the Lord will come in the same way: “On that day his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem ...Then the LORD my God will come, and all the holy ones with him” (Zechariah 14:4–5).

The triumphal entry described in the gospels also carries a cautionary lesson. The people of that day longed for a physical savior who would save them from the military domination of the Romans and restore Israel’s fortunes. When Jesus did not comply with their expectations, they became disenchanted soon after they rapturously welcomed him. Within a week of hailing him as their king, many of the people were calling for his crucifixion. While the Jews were hoping for a military leader who would be a king like David, Jesus would not comply with their expectations and desires for temporary physical help, so they were unable to see the lasting spiritual salvation he did offer them.

Nevertheless, Jesus’ entry was a triumphal event. Jesus did accept the people’s praise (Luke 19:40), and the details of the story from beginning to end show that a triumphal entry – a symbolic victory celebration – was intended. But if it was a triumph, what was the victory? Jesus had not yet defeated sin and death on the cross and had not yet completed the work he came to accomplish in this regard. Yet there were ways in which a victory was surely accomplished. Remember that the primary purpose of the angaria, by which Jesus obtained the donkey on which he rode, was to deliver a message. And at that point, at the end of his ministry, Jesus had successfully delivered the news of the kingdom of God – to the degree that

it was now established and would continue to spread throughout the world. He had also accomplished great victories in overcoming Satan (see Unit 6) and living the perfect life that was needed in order that he could give himself as a sacrifice for all people. So Jesus certainly had triumphed as he entered Jerusalem as the King who “comes to you, *righteous and victorious*, lowly and riding on a donkey” (Zechariah 9:9, emphases added). The entry of Jesus into Jerusalem prior to his death was indeed a triumphal celebration, and Jesus had delivered the only message that in the end really matters.

\* Note 1: Most ancient estimates of the population of Jerusalem come from just a few years after the time of Jesus. During the First Jewish-Roman War (AD 66–73), the population of Jerusalem was estimated at 600,000 by the Roman historian Tacitus, while the Jewish historian Josephus estimated that as many as 1,100,000 Jews were killed in the war and a further 97,000 were sold as slaves. Modern scholarly appraisals of the evidence have led to suggestions of smaller but still very significant population figures, with a number of estimates of a population around, or over, 100,000. Many more people would be present for festivals.

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**REVIEW AND REFLECTION:** (complete in your notebook)

**Basics:**

Summarize the ways in which Solomon’s coronational entry into Jerusalem foreshadowed the triumphal entry of Jesus.

**Beneath the Surface:**

The triumphal entry showed that Jesus does not always follow our expectations. In what ways should we remember this lesson?

**Everyday Applications:**

Today, many Christians celebrate a day – Palm Sunday – to remember the momentous occasion of the triumphal entry. But in what ways can we apply the story of the triumphal entry to Jesus’ desire to enter into our lives daily?

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