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Triumphal Entry (Matthew 21:1-11)

Matthew’s account of the Triumphal Entry (Matthew 21:1-11) marks a sharp transition in the account of Jesus’ ministry. It is at this point that Matthew marks Jesus’ declaration of authority to come into Jerusalem in a manner that depicts his claim to being the Jewish messiah. To gain a full understanding of this passage, this paper will examine the literary critical elements of the passage before an exegesis of the text. In the exegesis, the verses will be explored for their meaning within the context of Matthew’s story.

Literary Criticism

Since Matthew is a story, its literary qualities can be examined to determine a variety of elements such as context, literary form, structure, and redaction.

*Context.* The context that sets the scene for the triumphal entry into Jerusalem is not the preceding chapters of any of the Synoptic versions. Rather, it is Jesus and the people’s expectations that set the scene. In Matthew 20:17–19 gives Jesus’ last prediction of his impending death, which will happen on this particular trip to Jerusalem. This is the third time Jesus has predicted this (16:21; 17:22). The first one in 16:21 is identified by J. Kingsbury (*Matthew: Structure, Christology, Kingdom*) as the third major subdivision of Matthew, which is indicated by the twice-used formula “From that time on Jesus began to…”[[1]](#footnote-1) (Blomberg 23). Each marker moves the reader into a new emphasis in Jesus’ ministry, with this one leading into “the climactic development of his life—the road to the cross” (Blomberg 23).

Kingsbury sees the major emphasis throughout most of Matthew as Jesus in conflict. “Central to the plot of Matthew is the element of conflict. The principal conflict is between Jesus and Israel, and the primary resolution of this conflict is to be found in the death of Jesus” (Kingsbury 9). This is culminated by the religious leaders who were anticipating the return of Jesus to Jerusalem. John’s account has this group looking for Jesus in order to arrest him.

When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, many went up from the country to Jerusalem for their ceremonial cleansing before the Passover. *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*. (John 11:55-57; NIV)[[2]](#footnote-2)

The Triumphal Entry is set in this context. The latter is of special significance for Matthew’s predominately Jewish audience.

*Form criticism*. Form criticism examines the literary form of your passage. It answers questions regarding other places in the Bible where this form is used and which help to interpret this passage.

In *Matthew as Story,* Kingsbury explores Matthew from the perspective of narrative. He quotes Petersen, *Literary Criticism*, “The gospel is a unified narrative, and recognition of this is essential to its literary-critical study” (Kingsbury 1). Brown supports this by referencing Swartley’s *Israel’s Scripture* who “contends that the structure of the Synoptic Gospels was dictated by the OT story[[3]](#footnote-3) of God’s dealings with Israel” (Brown 102). Of special interest is the illustration Brown uses of a biography from the late first century A.D. entitled the *Lives of the Prophets*. He does emphasize that readers are to take caution not to think of biographies as we know them today (Brown 102). Additionally, Brown suggests the genre of Gospel (a record of deeds performed by divine figures) may be based on the imitation of secular biographies contemporary to Matthew (Brown 102). Nonetheless, Brown does see distinctions between Greco-Roman biographies and the Gospels such as anonymity of the Gospels, clear theological emphasis, and missionary goal (Brown 103).[[4]](#footnote-4)

Generally agreed though is that Matthew is a historical narrative but does not need to be held to a strict chronological structure. Bloomberg notes “writers in the ancient Middle East were far less occupied with exhibiting a linear development of thought…” (Blomberg 23). He states, “

In view of the historical and biographical styles of Matthew’s day, it is wise not to assume that two consecutive stories occurred one after the other unless one of the passages specifically declares that they did or unless the second passage refers to the first in a way that logically requires the stores to have occurred in that order (Blomberg 24).

Thus, the Matthean portrait of Jesus need not be a chronological development of his life in biographical form, detailing a linear life. Brown paints three distinct portraits of Jesus—the actual, the historical, and the Gospel. The first would be factual, social, and cultural. The historical “is a scholarly construct based on reading beneath the Gospel surface…” (Brown 105). The last portrait is the one painted by the author.

The Triumphal Entry is a literary narrative giving a portrait of the historical and Gospel Jesus. Assuming that the editors ended with an account reasonably accurate based on oral tradition, the events would play out as historical to the extent that they are true to their intent of depicting a Messianic event important to the Matthean audience.

While differences will be pointed out under the redaction question, there are, of course, similarities in that Matthew is part of the Synoptic accounts, recording similarly with Mark and Luke. The similarities and differences will contribute to the understanding of the account of the entry into Jerusalem, primarily because the Matthean account is keeping its Jewish audience in mind.

*Structure.* The structure of a passage focuses on patterns such as parallelism. It examines the parts of the passage. As indicated above, Matthew can be divided into three distinct sections separated by the phrase Ἀπὸ τότε ἤρξατο ὁ Ἰησοῦς (From that time on, Jesus…). The last one in 16:21 introduces the climactic finale of Jesus’ earthly life. From this point forward, everything is pointing toward his death. “Of all the priceless history which the Gospel writers have recorded, one-half is devoted to the final week of Jesus’ ministry” (Foster 1067). Almost half of Matthew is used to record the ending period of Jesus’ life. From this point on in Matthew, Jesus’ concentration is on final teachings and ultimately, his death. Guthrie notes that this Gospel moves between narrative and discourse. Chapter 21 opens with the Judean period, which includes the Triumphal Entry. This is followed by the fifth discourse section (23:1–25:46) (50).

Matthew’s account fits well with narrative literary form in that it depicts movement from–to (Jericho to Bethphage to Jerusalem), finding the donkey, informing the owners, riding the donkey, the people’s response and the leaders’ reactions. These are all historically needed facts to authenticate the narrative.

*Redaction criticism*. This literary critical examination asks if a passage came through an editorial process. Where changes made? Redaction criticism explains why certain changes have been made.

J. J. Griesbach was the first to label Matthew, Mark, and Luke as the Synoptic Gospels. He did this because of their similarity. These accounts “structure the ministry of Jesus according to a general geographic sequence” (Carson, Moo, and Morris 19). Statistically, their differences can be illustrated. Mark has 661 verses, Matthew has 1,068, and Luke has 1,149. Eighty percent of Mark’s are reproduced in Matthew and 65% in Luke (Brown 111).

Traditionally, the order of use was Matthew by Luke, which holds the oldest place in source theory. This can be dated back to Augustine and has generally been accepted by the Roman church until the mid-20th century (Brown 113). With Augustine, the order of acceptance was also the order of use. Matthew was first, followed by Mark who shortened the Matthean account. Luke and John came next. At the end of the eighteenth century, Griesbach introduced a theory in which the order was Matthew, Luke and the Mark. The figure below illustrates this theory:

 Matthew

 Luke

 Mark

As source studies gained momentum, a variety of theories evolved. A common element of all these was the use of additional sources. Some were supposed to be written and some oral. Some were or Aramaic origin and others Greek. The ultimate victor in this battle was the Two-Source Hypothesis introduced after the Markan priority was accepted. The position of Mark was because it was the first written, thus both Matthew and Mark drew from it. It is illustrated thus:

 Mark Q (the other source[s])

 Matthew Luke

The following table lists events in the Synoptics that illustrates the theory of the priority of Mark:

Order of Events in the Synoptics

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Periscope | Matthew | Mark | Luke |
| Jesus and Beelzebub | 12:22-37 | 3:20-30 | **11:14-28** |
| The Sign of Jonah | 12:38-45 | — | 11:29-32 |
| Jesus' mother and brothers | 12:46-50 | 3:31-35  | **8:19-21** |
| Parable of the Sower | 13:1-9 | 4:1-9 | 8:4-8 |
| Reason for the Parables | 13:10-17 | 4:10-12 | 8:9-10 |
| Interpretation of Parable of the Sower | 13:18-23 | 4:13-20 | 8:11-15 |
| Parable of the Weeds | 13:24-30 | — | — |
| A Lamp on a Stand | — | 4:21-25 | 8:16-18 |
| Parable of the Seed growing secretly | — | 4:26-29 | — |
| Parable of the Mustard Seed | 13:31-32 | 4:30-34 | — |
| Parable of the Yeast | 13:33 | — | — |
| Jesus' Speaking in Parables | 13:34-35 | — | — |
| Interpretation of Parable of the Weeds | 13:36-43 | — | — |
| Parable of Hidden Treasure | 13:44 | — | — |
| Parable of the Pearl | 13:45-46 | — | — |
| Parable of the Net | 13:47-50 | — | — |
| The Householder | 13:51-52 | — | — |
| The Stilling of the Storm | **8:18, 23-27** | 4:35-41 | 8:22-25 |
| Healing of Gerasene Demoniac | **8:28-34** | 5:1-20 | 8:26-39 |
| Raising of Jairus's Daughter/Healing of a Woman | **9:18-26** | 5:21-43 | 8:40-56 |
| Rejection at Nazareth | 13:53-58 | 6:1-6a | **4:16-30** |
| Sending out of the Twelve | **10:1-15** | 6:6b-13 | 9:1-6 |
| Beheading of John the Baptist | 14:1-12 | 6:14-29 | [9:7-9] |
| Feeding of the Five Thousand | 14:13-21 | 6:30-44 | 9:10-17 |
| Walking on the Water | 14:22-26 | 6:45-56 | — |

**Note:** Bold type indicates places where Matthew and Luke deviate from the order of events followed in Mark. A dash indicates that the incident does not appear in the gospel (Carson, Moo, and Morris 28).

When the accounts of the Triumphal Entry are placed in a parallel fashion, it quickly becomes obvious to even the most untrained eye that the accounts differ. This illustrates perfectly the fact that these writers had access to different sources and wrote their account for specific audiences, recalling the facts that were most important to that particular group. As mentioned above, Matthew’s listeners were mainly Jewish. Because of this, his introduction of the prophecy for Zechariah 9:9 was a necessary edit to the account. This raises the question of whether this was added later since neither Mark nor Luke included the quotation from Zechariah in their accounts. The answer is not definite because neither of these writers’ audiences was Jewish so the inclusion would not have had the same impact as with the Matthean audience. On the other hand, oral tradition may have added this to meet the growing Gentile inclusion in the Church. This would help keep the Jewish heritage of Christianity for some of Matthew’s group.

Textually, the only variation is in verse 4. “Several witnesses (Mmg 42 ita,c,h copbo ms Hillary) add Ζαχαριou before or after προφήτου; other witnesses (vg4 mss copbo ms eth) prefix “Isaiah” (Metzger 50). These are the work of later editors and, therefore, did not make their way into any of the extant texts.

Editorial work becomes the most obvious as we compare the Matthean account with that of Mark and Luke. This will be illustrated by two methods—omissions/additions and textual variations—within the shared texts.

**Omissions/additions**

Matthew 21:2—Find a donkey with her colt. Mark and Luke mention only the colt while Matthew states that there would be donkey with her colt. The reason for the redaction follows in vv. 4-5 with the prophecy of Zechariah. This Hebrew text states that the king would be “riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” Matthew would naturally include all that the prophecy mentions for the sake of his audience who may have been familiar with the text. Nonetheless, “there is little justification here for the common accusation that Matthew has created an absurd picture of Jesus straddling two animals” (Bloomberg, 313).

Matthew 21:3—returning the animal. Matthew differs from both Mark and Luke regarding Jesus statements to the owner. Mark states it will be returned with haste (Mark’s characteristic use of εὐθὺς here for a sense of urgency). Additionally, Matthew uses a different tense for the word “send back.” “**He will send him back** (ἀποστελλει [*apostellei*]). Present indicative in futuristic sense. Matt. 21:3 has the future ἀποστελει [*apostelei*] (Robertson).

Matthew 21:4-5—the prophecy of Zechariah. This prophecy is omitted from both Mark and Luke, which is an indication of Matthew’s Jewish audience. The phrase “Daughter of Zion” is used in Zechariah but Isaiah also has a similar expression in 62:11. “Say to the Daughter of Zion, `See, your Savior comes!’” This would explain the redaction mentioned above where Isaiah was used in some manuscripts.

Matthew 21:6—following instructions. Matthew takes Mark’s place in giving a straightforward description that the disciples did what they were told while Mark goes over the details of finding and untie but Luke states it was found as they were told.

Contact with the owner. Matthew omits the conversation with the owner. Mark and Luke both record it.

Matthew 21:7—Jesus on the colt. Matthew and Mark state that Jesus sat on the donkey (και ἐπεκαθισεν [Jesus “took his seat” (ἐπεκαθισεν [*epekathisen*], ingressive aorist active) upon the garments.] ἐπανω αὐτων), but Luke states that Jesus was placed upon the donkey ((ἐπεβιβασαν τον Ἰησουν [*epebibasan ton Iēsoun*]). First aorist active. Old verb, to cause to mount, causative verb from βαινω [*bainō*], to go) (Robertson). Both hold the same idea. “Luke makes alterations that improve the style of passages in Mark and probably also in Q. He does not wholly rewrite such passages…” (Carson, Moo, and Morris 118). This would certainly seem to be a stylistic redaction to emphasize the fact that Jesus was satisfying a kingly function by riding into Jerusalem in such a fashion.

Matthew 21:8—cloaks and branches. Matthew follows Mark here with the reference to two different articles laid in Jesus’ path. Luke omits the branches.

Matthew 21:9—the crowds. Matthew again follows Mark by dividing the crowd into two groups, those that went ahead and those who followed. Luke combines them into the whole crowd (lit., great number of disciples; τὸ πλῆθος τῶν μαθητῶ). Additionally, Matthew adds the Hebraism “Son of David,” which is a necessary addition. Also, note that the phrasing of the praise is different with Matthew having the fuller account:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Mark 11 | Luke 19 | Matthew 21 |
| 9 Those who went ahead and those who followed shouted, “Hosanna!” “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” | 38 “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!” “Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!” | 9 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!” |

This is a loose translation of Psalm 118:25-26—“O LORD, save us; O LORD, grant us success. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD. From the house of the LORD we bless you.” This passage is from the group of Psalms called the Hallel (Psalm 113-118). The Hallel, composed of Psalms 113–118, was sung regularly during Passover season and would be fresh on everyone’s mind; later generations applied these psalms to the future redemption for which they hoped. Jesus cites Psalm 118 messianically in Matthew 21:42 (Keener).

Matthew records Jesus using this phrase in 23:39 when he is lamenting over Jerusalem. This time, it is a reference to a second appearance, either after the resurrection or for the end of time appearance. His appearing will once again be heralded by this exclamation, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.”

Omission. Matthew omits the unusual Hebrew praise recorded in Mark 11:10. Mark calls (King) David ‘our father’ even though this “has no direct Jewish parallels” (Losie 856).

Matthew 21:10-11

Matthew alone records the account of the people raising the questions of Jesus’ identity.

*Conclusions.* The redactors’ pens were busy compiling their varied sources to image Jesus in this climactic event in such a way as to impress their audiences of his divine appointment. For the Jewish audiences, Matthew adds the necessary Hebraisms to keep their Messiah linked to the prophetic past. Mark and Luke’s audiences need to see the man Jesus with little concern of his background. Thus, it is purely a historical event. Jew or Greek would understand that Jesus was making a statement with this mode of entry and the timing.

The historicity of this event is not questioned by recent scholars so much as “how much those who handed on the tradition shaped the story in order to make it a vehicle for expressing the allegedly later belief of the early church that Jesus was the fulfillment of the Jewish hope for a messianic deliverer in the form of a Davidic king” (Losie 854).

Key words/Phrases

What are the theologically important words in the passage? Do these words evoke any other parts of the Bible? Are these words used in a new way by the author of this passage? What do these words mean? These are all important questions for the exegete.

*King/Kingdom*. “The decisive establishment of manifestation of the divine sovereignty has drawn so near to men that they are now confronted with the possibility and the ineluctable necessity of repentance and conversion” (Blomberg 74).

The Old Testament background can be summed up to some extent by the following lengthy paragraph:

The kingship of Yahweh is an aspect of faith found neither in the wisdom literature, the oral teaching of many of the prophets, nor in a considerable number of historical narratives. It is frequent, on the other hand, in the hymns of the Psalter (the so-called enthronement-Psalms), later prophetic writings including the prophecies to the nations in Jeremiah (e.g. Jer. 46:18; 48:15; 51:57), and in the narrative parts of the book of Daniel. Thus, it tends to feature in the later parts of the OT. This suggests that the concept of Yahweh’s kingship was not a constitutive element in the original faith of Israel (cf. A. Alt, *Kleine Schriften zur Geschichte des Volkes Israel*, I, 1968, 348) (Klappert).

Matthew uses some form of the Greek word fifty-three times in his Gospel. [[5]](#footnote-5) It is used to describe Gods reign in respect to heaven (reign by the presence of heaven on earth)[[6]](#footnote-6). The parables (ch. 13) give the laws of the kingdom of heaven. Concluding the parables of the kingdom, Jesus said, “Therefore every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old.” (13:52) Peter was promised the keys to the kingdom (16:19).

(I)n Mark’s Gospel Jesus is never called a “king” until he stands before Pilate on the way to the cross; yet from that point forward, within the space of thirty verses, he is called “king” six times: three times by Pilate (15:2, 9, 12), twice by mockers just before and just after his crucifixion (15:18, 32), and once by the inscription over his cross (15:26) (Marcus 73).

This term is of obvious significance throughout the NT.

Son of David—“indicates recognition of Jesus’ ancestry and a hope that he is the Messiah” (Keener).

Branches—(Matt. 21:8; cf. John 12:13) were associated with rejoicing (cf. Lev. 23:40), and later with expressions of triumph or victory (1 Macc. 13:51) (Hughes and Laney). Indications of the Coronation of Jesus as King of the Jews.

Hosanna—God save us! Augustine wrote regarding Matthew 11:9,

*Hosanna*, however, is a word of supplicating, as some say who know the Hebrew language, more declaring a feeling than signifying something. Just as in the Latin language there are words which we call interjections, as when in sorrow we say, Heu! Or when we are amazed, we say, “Oh, what a great thing!” For then *oh* signifies nothing except the feeling of one who is amazed. (Tractates on John 51.2) (Oden and Hall 156).

Blessed. “Compared with the fundamental significance of blessing in the OT, the NT gives less prominence to both the concept and the act” (Link 212). This word is used in the NT as an expression of praise.

Theological analysis

What does this passage say about relationship with God? As stated at the beginning, Jesus had predicted his death three times before making this fateful journey into Jerusalem. D. R. Catchpole argues that the Gospel accounts fit the pattern of accounts found in Jewish literature of “the celebratory entry to a city by a hero figure who has previously achieved his triumph”. Further, in this parallel. 1) Victory & Status, 2) formal entry, 3) Welcome & acclamation, 4) Temple visit (if there is one), and 5) Sacrifice or cleansing of the temple, which ever is most appropriate (854-855). Since Jesus’ entry fits this pattern[[7]](#footnote-7), Catchpole concludes that this is the acknowledgement of the people of the status already achieved by Jesus (Losie 855).

There are two relationship established by this passage. The first is the relationship of Jesus to God. As King, and assuming Matthew is using Kingdom in his normal fashion as noted above, Jesus is God’s appointed to rule the Kingdom of Heaven, or at least, initiate the rule of God via the conquest of the cross and the empty grave. Jesus goal was to “make a definite and public claim of his Messiahship” (Robinson 170-171). Ironically, this would be done on a cross—a battle field far different from that expected by the Jewish nation. “The central irony in the passion narratives of the Gospels is that Jesus’ crucifixion turns out to be his elevation to kingship” (Marcus 73).

The second relationship is to the people. Their exclamation that Jesus is coming in the name of the Lord is Jewish confidence in their covenant relationship with God. Since God had promised to fight for them (Ex. 14:14; Deut. 1:30; 3:22; 20:4), the coming Messiah would be their expected victor over Rome. This is the reason for their joy, which turned to a plea for his death later. Jesus surprised them by offering a more personal relationship that even their original covenant. This was God’s New Covenant prophesied by Jeremiah (31:31ff)

*Questions addressed for the original community.* As mentioned throughout the redaction section, Matthew’s community was predominately Jewish and, if his intentions can be known, it would seem that many of the redactions and the nature of the narrative would lend itself to that fact. Among other concepts, at least the following are recognizable in Matthew: There are a number of terms indicating that Jesus was the one to whom the Old Testament points.[[8]](#footnote-8) Could this be an indication that the Matthean church wanted an absolute tie between Jesus and their predicted Messiah. After all, the leaders of Jesus’ day denied his claims and killed him. This narrative could have been of special interest to his listeners because it was a historical event that many may have know about or witnessed. Therefore, Matthew wanted them to realize the theological impact of the event with God’s intentions for the Jews. Here was the Coronation of their King, especially those who have accepted him as the rightful heir to the true (spiritual) Davidic throne.

Did Matthew’s audience raise questions regarding the nature of the Kingdom? Was this all there was? Was this just the beginning and Jesus would return (soon?) to finalize his work? They would look to 3:2 and John’s statement that the kingdom is near (ἤγγικεν—"to make near, refl. to come near") and 12:28 where the term ἔφθασεν ἐφʼ ὑμᾶς signifies that the kingdom has come upon those from whom the Spirit of God drives out demons (Swanson). This Greek idiom is formed by using the Aorist tense “to emphasize the certainty and immediacy of an action that properly belongs in the future by describing is as though it had already transpired (Caragounis 1989, 12-23)” (Caragounis 423). The apparent indecisiveness of Matthew’s writings would raise the questions of the kingdom. To validate the fact that, whether the kingdom is fully here or to come, it was at least inaugurated by Jesus with his Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem.

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1. The first time this is used is in 4:17. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Matthew also records that the people were in anticipation of his arrival (21:10-11). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Story and narrative belong to the same genre of literature. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Of special interest is note 8 on the same page regarding the distinction between the Gospel writers’ view of Jesus and the Greco-Roman view of the subject of their biographies. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Kingdom of heaven is Matthew’s favorite term, used thirty-five times but he will substitute Kingdom of God (four times) as an equivalent term. At the institution of the Eucharistic meal, Matthew used the term Father’s kingdom (26:29), which has a sense of endearment and is less formal than the other two. Only five times is it used for a kingdom other than Gods (12:25-26; 24:7). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Thus the words of the Lord’s prayer regarding the will of the Father being done on earth even as in heaven. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Some would think that the redactor’s pen might have formed this pattern in order to support the achievement of Jesus at his resurrection. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Jesus is the promised Messiah, the Son of David, the Son of God, the Son of Man, Immanuel (Carson, Moo, and Morris; 81). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)