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The Misunderstood King

Understanding the background behind a passage in the Bible can make all the difference when it comes to application. For example, Christ sent His disciples out into the world, saying this:

Matthew 10:9-10, "Do not acquire gold, or silver, or copper for you money belts, or a bag for your journey, or even two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for the worker is worthy of his support."

Traditionally, this text has been interpreted simply to mean that Christ wanted His disciples to be supported by those who received their ministry. However, when we look at the background of this passage, we see that Christ's command has striking parallels with the

ordinances surrounding the dress of those who approached the Temple for worship. According to the laws of the Temple, the worshipper could NOT approach the Temple:

- “With his staff.”
- “With shoes on his feet”- he could only come with sandals.
- “With dust upon his feet.”
- “With money tied to him in his purse.”

In view of this, Christ’s commandment here would have been understood by the Apostles to mean that NOT ONLY were they to be supported by those to whom they ministered, BUT they were to go in the same spirit and manner as they had countless times gone to the Temple to worship!

With this we see how important it is to understand the background of a text. And, I want to introduce you to a text whose significance is oft-times missed on account of a lack of understanding of the culture of Christ’s day: Matthew 21!

Traditionally, this has been called the “Triumphal Entry.” It is a description of Christ’s last public appearance in which He manifested Himself to the world as the Messiah. Now, while this passage is frequently dramatized, yet just like in Matthew 10, much is missed without an understanding of the culture and background lying behind this event!

And so I ask these questions:

- What took place on that first “Palm Sunday?”
- What was the significance of this event?
- And how does this text relate to our lives today?

I want to address these questions as we discuss Easter and the King of Kings. In this regard notice: The first Palm Sunday was really a celebration of a misunderstood king.

Matthew 21:1a, “And when they had approached Jerusalem and had come to Bethphage, to the Mount of Olives...”

Bethphage was a suburb of Jerusalem separated from the city by the Kidron Valley. As Christ came near to this city, He would have been one of thousands who were hastily journeying to Jerusalem for the Passover. In this regard, it is sobering to think that as a worshipper travelling on the road with Christ, you would have been travelling alongside THE Passover Lamb!

Matthew 21:1b-3, “...then Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, ‘Go into the village opposite you [this would have been Bethphage], and immediately you will find a donkey tied there and a colt with her; untie them, and bring them to Me [Matthew is the only Gospel that records that there were 2 donkeys: a mother and her offspring. This is not

a problem. Because Christ intended to ride the colt, it makes logical sense that to try to separate the mother from the colt would have required much effort. And so, Christ requested both of which only the colt is mentioned in the other Gospels]. And if anyone says something to you, you shall say, 'The Lord has need of them,' and immediately he will send them [In Mark 11:5-6; Luke 19:33 we read that the 2 disciples were confronted by the owners who, after hearing that "the Lord needs them" allowed the disciples to carry out their mission]."

Notice that Christ's activity here reflects a huge shift in His ministry. Until now, Christ has labored to minister in obscurity. In Matthew 12, we read of Christ withdrawing from the multitudes. Why? Because the Messiah was one who, "...[would] not quarrel, nor cry out; nor [would] anyone hear His voice in the streets" (Matthew 12:19).

In John 7, after His brothers chided Him to go to Judea and make Himself known, Christ said, "My time is not yet at hand..." (Matthew 12:6).

In Mark 1:44, we read of the healing of the leper and Christ's surprising words, "See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, for a testimony to them."

Truly throughout His ministry Jesus sought to labor in obscurity. And yet here we see a change! Far from His previously designed anonymity, Christ deliberately staged this ride to Jerusalem- which leads us to the conclusion that a statement is being made here, a statement of epic proportions. And what is the "Statement?"

Matthew 21: 2-3 reflects a practice in Christ's day known as *ἀγγάρια* (*aggaria*) or "requisitioning." It held that a king could requisition the property of another in times of need. And thus, that Jesus exercised this right suggests that He is here proclaiming His identity as King! Furthermore, notice v. 2 and Christ's choice of animals: a donkey. The sign of royalty in the mind of the Jew was the donkey (cf. 2 Samuel 16:1-2; Judges 5:10; 1 Kings 1:33). And thus, Christ's choice to requisition and ride a donkey into Jerusalem made a clear statement: Jesus is indeed the long-awaited King! Now, if there was any doubt as to the statement that Christ was making, notice...

Matthew 21:4-5, "Now this took place that what was spoken through the prophet might be fulfilled, saying, 'Say to the daughter of Zion [this refers to the "people of Jerusalem"], behold your King is coming to you, gentle, and mounted on a donkey, even on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.'"

The primary reference here is Zechariah 9:9- written 500 years earlier- which predicted that the people of Jerusalem would hail the Messiah as their King. Now this clearly asserts the point of Christ's Triumphal Entry: Jesus is the long-awaited King- The Messiah!

This raises a very important question: Why the pronouncement now? Why not earlier, at the

very beginning of His ministry? Why did Christ hide His identity for three years, and then, in a matter of hours, forcefully proclaim it? The answer is best seen when we understand a little of the background of the nation of Israel and their understanding of the coming Messiah.

In Genesis 12, God promised to make Abraham a great nation. To the Jew, this promise was understood to have come to its fullness in 1 Samuel with the beginning of the Monarchy in the 11th century BC. And yet, this “promise of a great nation” was short-lived! In 722 BC, the Assyrians conquered the Northern kingdom of Israel and in 586 BC the Babylonians conquered the Southern kingdom of Judah. The result? From 586 BC onward the people of God looked for the “Messiah”- the Promised One who would:

- Be of the Royal line of David, and thus a king!
- Victoriously restore the ancient glory of the people of God, and thus...
- Reinstall the promise made to Abraham.

With each country that held Israel captive, and there were many; Babylon, the Persians, Seleucids, the Ptolemies, the Greeks, and now the Romans, the people of God anticipated the coming of One who would conquer their oppressors!

Now, this anticipation was brought to a fever heat with the domination of the Greeks and the Romans- who proved to be quite ruthless in their rule of Palestine. And thus, by the time of Jesus, the Jewish anticipation of a coming Messiah- a military victor- had grown to dangerous proportions.

Now, take this “MISUNDERSTANDING” of what the Messiah was going to be and it becomes clear as to why Christ kept His true identity hidden for so long. To have revealed it earlier was to risk misleading the crowds! After Christ fed the 5,000, we read this:

John 6:15, “Jesus therefore perceiving that they were intending to come and take him by force, to make him king, with-drew again to the mountain by himself.”

On account of their misunderstanding of Scripture, the people here were ready to set Christ as King and march on Rome! This helps explain John the Baptist’s doubts in Matthew 11. John was the forerunner of the “Messiah,” and yet the Baptizer found himself in prison- that wasn’t supposed to be the result of the Messiah!

Matthew 11:2-3, “Now when John in prison heard of the works of Christ, he sent word by his disciples, and said to Him, ‘Are you the expected one, or shall we look for someone else?’”

That is why, as Christ approached the besieged city of Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday, He wept saying:

Luke 19:42, “If you had known in this day, even you, the things which make for peace!

But now they have been hidden from your eyes.”

The “City of Peace” - Jerusalem- equated their peace with the warfare of a Military Leader! And thus, as Christ entered Jerusalem on the donkey, He was heralded as the “Deliverer”- which means the Jews NOT ONLY were proclaiming Him to be their King, BUT ALSO their military commander! And all of this explains why Christ withheld His true identity; yet it doesn’t explain why He revealed it here. To answer this listen to Matthew 16:

Matthew 16:21, “From that time Jesus Christ began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day.”

Almost a year before His death, Christ’s focus shifted to Jerusalem and His work there. And thus, as Christ stood on the Mount of Olives on the day of His triumphal entry, He knew that in less than one week, He would be crucified. Accordingly, the time had FINALLY come to reveal Himself as the TRUE Messiah, His life was almost over! Toward this end notice again:

Matthew 21:5, “Say to the daughter of Zion, ‘Behold your King is coming to you, gentle, and mounted on a donkey...”

The word “gentle” receives the emphasis here. By His ride on the donkey (quite in contrast to the Roman pomp and splendor of a stallion- an animal which served as a symbol of war), Christ was proclaiming Himself to be the coming Messiah, yet NOT the military leader expected and anticipated by the people; but the Prince of Peace, the Gentle One, whose triumphal procession would lead to suffering, humiliation, and ultimately death!

And so, the time was at hand for Christ to manifest Himself to the world as the Genuine Messiah, as the “Promised One” who God had sent to save the people from their sin! And thus we read:

Matthew 21:6-7, “And the disciples went and did just as Jesus had directed them, and brought the donkey and the colt, and laid on them their garments, on which He sat.”

The Triumphal Entry is nothing less than the manifestation of Christ’s Identity to the people in His day: He is INDEED the King of the Jews- the Messiah! This leads us to vv. 8-9 and the details of Christ’s coronation.

The Coronation, Matthew 21:8-9

Matthew 21:8, “And most of the multitude...”

Literally this reads, “the very great crowd.” Matthew is stressing the fact that this was an impressive event! It didn’t occur with a few onlookers. Rather, it was heralded by thousands-

most likely hundreds of thousands! In a census taken about ten years after this time, the number of lambs slaughtered at the Passover was determined to be about 260,000. And because one lamb was allowed to be offered for up to 10 people, the worshipers in Jerusalem that week could have numbered over 2,000,000!

Matthew 21:8b: "...spread their garments in the road..."

This reflects an ancient custom in Christ's day (2 Kings. 9:13) in which citizens threw their garments in the road for their monarch to ride over- a symbolic gesture which conveyed the idea of respect and submission. It was as if the people were saying to Christ, "Because you are our King, we place ourselves at your feet, even to walk over if necessary."

Matthew 21:8c, "...and others were cutting branches from the trees, and spreading them in the road."

From John 12:13, we learn that the branches were from palm trees, which were symbolic of salvation and joy. It is obvious from this verse that to the crowds Christ indeed was the DELIVERER, the long-awaited Messiah! Now NOTICE a very important truth: Christ's pronouncement here that He is the coming King- The Messiah- was received by the multitudes. In fact, notice Matthew 21:9.

Matthew 21:9a, "And the multitude going before Him, and those who followed after were crying out, saying, 'Hosanna...'"

"Hosanna" is the Gk. form of the Hebrew words translated, "Save us!"

Matthew 21:9b, "'...to the Son of David...'"

According to Jeremiah 23:5-6, this appellation was a Messianic title, a statement of Christ's "royal dignity." In effect, the multitudes were pleading here for the Messiah's deliverance, *"Save us now!... Be our King!... Manifest your reign and rule today!"*

Matthew 21:9c, "'...blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord; Hosanna in the highest!'"

This phrase was taken from Psalm 118, which was one of the Psalms of the Hallel. It is important to note that in a couple of days the crowds would have chanted this Psalm during Passover in anticipation of God's coming deliverance. And yet here the crowds were chanting the Hallel in response to Christ's arrival in Jerusalem! This once again reveals the crowd's valuation of Jesus: He was their coming Deliver/King- which brings us to the confusion.

The Confusion

Matthew 21:10, “And when He had entered Jerusalem, all the city was stirred, saying, ‘Who is this?’”

Notice, when the Magi came looking for the King of the Jews, Matthew tells us that all of Jerusalem was “troubled” (Matthew 2:3). And now that the KING has arrived, the city once again has become “stirred!” The term “stirred” comes from a word that literally means “to shake violently.” It refers to literal earthquakes, and here references the chaos that accompanied Christ’s entrance to Jerusalem... the whole city was shaken!

Now notice... the question, “Who is this?” is NOT asked because Christ was unknown (again, cf. vv. 8-9). RATHER, the force of the question is, “Who is this *REALLY*?” In other words, the crowds, who have just been heralding Jesus as the Messiah, have somehow gotten confused as to Christ’s true identity.

Matthew 21:11, “And the multitudes were saying, ‘This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth in Galilee.’”

Something took place between the time of the crowd’s acclamation of Jesus as the Messiah on the road to Jerusalem and Christ’s presence in the city. For by the time Christ finished His “coronation ride,” He was little more than a “prophet from Galilee.” Why? What happened?

While the text doesn’t tell us, it shows us that Christ’s activity once He got in Jerusalem clearly turned the crowds off. See, the crowds were about to celebrate the Passover, which commemorated the Lord’s miraculous deliverance of Israel from Egypt! What better occasion could there be for the Lord’s Anointed, the Messiah, to make the ultimate and final deliverance of His people from tyranny?!

In fact, had Christ been the military victor the crowds were expecting, He no doubt would have gotten off of the donkey... marched to the temple mount with the crowds following Him... entered the Praetorium (the Roman guard house built on the temple mount)... and driven the Romans from Jerusalem! In short, He would have acted like a “King!” And yet, we read nothing of the sort. Rather, Christ entered the city on a lowly donkey... dismounted... marched to the temple mount with the crowds following Him... AND THEN [and this is key] ATTACKED the corrupt worship practices of the Jews placed there by the High Priest (cf. Matthew 21:12-17)!

In view of the crowd’s expectation of what the Messiah would be, Jesus’ actions in Jerusalem would have been deflating. Consequently, just as soon as the crowd’s praises had begun, they ceased... for Jesus was little more than a “prophet from Galilee.” And in four days, He would be nothing less than a criminal worthy of crucifixion!

Do you see the point? So often we look at Palm Sunday with a romantic filter, for that was the day Christ came as King! Yet in reality, Palm Sunday was a day of misunderstanding and ultimately rejection!

Christ did NOT die, as many suppose, as an outcast, a criminal, or a victim of cruel circumstances! RATHER, Jesus died as the rejected Messiah! When it was clear that Jesus wasn't going to give them what they wanted, the people cast Him aside!

This is such an important passage for us, for we are still prone to this error! As the Messiah, Christ did come to make war; yet NOT against Rome or any other nation, BUT against sin, Satan, and death! Christ came NOT to offer an external peace to the world, BUT to secure the infinitely greater blessing of eternal peace with God! And yet, so many in the Church miss this!

Recall the rebuke of Christ after He fed the 5000?

John 6:26, "Jesus answered them and said, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate of the loaves, and were filled.'"

Today so many think of Jesus as a Messiah who came to deliver His people from illness, bad circumstances, war, societal injustice, pain, misery, temporal difficulties, and a whole lot more! Now while it is true that Christ's advent ultimately will have an effect on these things (specifically when He comes again), nevertheless Christ came to

1. DELIVER us from the penalty and power of sin and so
2. SECURE an eternal peace with God!

Dr. John MacArthur put it quite well:

Many people today are open to a Jesus who they think will give them wealth, health, success, happiness, and the other worldly things they want. Like the multitude at the triumphal entry, they will loudly acclaim Jesus as long as they believe He will satisfy their selfish desires. But like the same multitude a few days later, they will reject and denounce Him when He does not deliver as expected. (MacArthur, 1988, p. 262)

Accordingly, the message of Palm Sunday endures even today: Christ's Triumphal Entry stands as a warning of the fickleness of the human heart! As Peter vowed that he would never deny Christ, and yet did so a couple of hours later (Matthew 26:69-75), so also we must beware: We are no different!

Accordingly, as we proclaim our "Hosannas" - our "Save Us Lord" - this day and every day, let us be ever mindful as to what we are asking the Lord to "Save us from..." It is NOT

- Temporal difficulties:

2 Timothy 3:12, "And indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."
- Harsh Circumstances:

1 Corinthians 4:11, "To this present hour we are both hungry and thirsty, and are poorly clothed, and are roughly treated, and are homeless."

- Ultimately Suffering:

2 Corinthians 12:7, "And because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me..."

RATHER, the shout of "Hosanna" is a call for Christ to save us from Sin- specifically its ultimate effect in our life (Slavery) and its ultimate consequence (Death)!

With this, notice a most encouraging truth! Though the crowds who heralded Jesus as the Christ on Palm Sunday would soon turn against Him and even abandon Him to death, notice that Christ nevertheless ACCEPTED THEIR PRAISE! The Point? Though many times we worship Christ in weakness, misunderstanding, and hypocrisy, yet if you are in Christ, God:

- Accepts you as His own.
- Approves of you as His dear child.
- Loves you with an everlasting love!
- Promises you the ultimate participation in Christ's final coronation as the King of Kings (Philippians 3:20-21)!

If you are one this day who does not have a saving relationship with Christ, wait no longer!

According to Exodus 12:2-6, each Jewish household (or groupings of ten) was required to obtain their "Passover lamb" on the tenth day of Nisan. This was a big event in which the Passover lamb would live with the family four days, and then be sacrificed. Did you know that Christ's Triumphal Entry most likely occurred on the tenth day of Nisan- the day that the sacrificial lamb for Passover was chosen?

In other words, Palm Sunday is the day that the people of God received the Lamb of God into their hearts much as a family received their sacrificial lamb into their home! And, just as with the Passover lamb, Jesus Christ would be sacrificed just four days later on the fourteenth of Nisan for the sins of His people! And so,

John 1:29b, "Behold, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the World!"- Gospel!

Works Cited

MacArthur, D. J. (1988). *Matthew 16-23: The MacArthur New Testament Commentary*. Chicago: Moody Publishers.

