

2. Somehow the word of Jesus' presence in Bethany got out such that many Jews (in this context, the term is used broadly rather than referring specifically to the ruling authorities) came to Bethany to see Him and also Lazarus (v. 9). Evidently some among them travelled to Jerusalem with the news that Jesus was indeed coming up for Passover, for John recorded that the multitude assembled for the feast heard He was coming, made preparations by gathering tree branches and then went out to meet Him on the road leading into the city (12:12ff). This episode is commonly referred to as the *Triumphal Entry* and it was a hugely important episode within Jesus' self-revelation and work as Israel's Messiah. Two things especially make the case:

- 1) First, its importance is evident in the fact that all four gospel writers included it in their account. Though they constructed their records with differences in content and emphases, they all believed this episode was essential to a meaningful account of Jesus the Messiah.
- 2) Second, the particulars of the episode and its timing demonstrate its critical role within Jesus' self-presentation and His interpretation of His person and mission. It was an explicit act of prophetic fulfillment (recognized by all of the gospel writers) which occurred at the climax of Jesus' ministration just prior to His death in fulfillment of the Passover. Moreover, it represented Jesus' final, climactic return to Jerusalem – to *Zion*, itself a significant act of prophetic fulfillment.

Because the Triumphal Entry is recounted by all four evangelists, it must be examined accordingly. Each of the writers has his own unique treatment and emphases so that the four accounts must be synthesized to derive the fullest sense of the episode, the surrounding occurrences and their significance within Jesus' unfolding mission. The following initial observations are helpful in accomplishing that synthesis:

- The first thing the reader notices is that John's account is the briefest and Luke's the most comprehensive. Also, and consistent with their overall gospel records, Matthew and Mark's accounts closely parallel each other.
- So John is the only one of the four who omitted Jesus' temple action following His entry into Jerusalem. Some scholars have concluded that John misplaced this episode, locating it at the Passover at the beginning of Jesus' ministry rather than the end (ref. 2:13ff). This is certainly possible, but another explanation is that Jesus performed the same sort of action at both His first and final public Passovers. John's record of Jesus' explanation for His temple action (2:18-19) is absent from the synoptic parallels, but Matthew and Mark reference it in their accounts of Jesus' trial (Matthew 26:61; Mark 14:58). This indicates that Jesus did indeed speak these words and there's no reason to doubt that He spoke them in connection with His action in the temple. Whether John situated this episode correctly is another question; his approach was thematic rather than strictly chronological and placing the temple episode where he did – especially with his addition of Jesus' interpretation and his own commentary (2:17-22) – contributes to his early emphasis on Jesus as Yahweh's restored temple (cf. 1:14, 4:19-26).

- In John's account, then, Jesus' temple action spoke to the temple's destruction and rebuilding, but as these ideas signified His own death and resurrection. And if there were indeed two such temple episodes – one introducing Jesus' public self-disclosure and the other concluding it (recorded in the Synoptics), it follows that the first pointed to and found its climactic counterpart in the second. This relationship, then, must be understood in terms of Jesus' interpretive explanation following the first episode as well as the entry into Jerusalem which immediately preceded the second one. These considerations are sufficient to demonstrate that there are numerous dimensions and strands of meaning in the Triumphal Entry and they must be sorted out and properly related if this action is to be understood.

- One other initial observation is that the crowd's actions during the Triumphal Entry had an historical precedent. This precedent doubtless informed those actions (why they did them) and what the crowd was saying by them. This precedent occurred during the Maccabean revolt in two particulars: First, palm branches were carried to the temple at the time Judas Maccabeus reconsecrated it after expelling the Syrians. Two decades later, the Jews took full possession of Jerusalem carrying palm branches into the city after Judas' brother Simon liberated the Jerusalem *Acra* as the last Syrian stronghold. The events of this era – the liberation of Zion, reconsecration of Yahweh's temple and establishment of a Hebrew reign and dynasty – were in the forefront of Israel's consciousness in the first century and there's no doubt that the multitude spreading palm branches as Jesus rode into the city somehow connected Him and His entrance into Jerusalem with these historical, even messianic circumstances. This conclusion is proven out by their chants of praise (12:13) and the disciples' later insight (12:14-16).

In view of these considerations, the approach here will be two-fold: The first task is to provide a harmonized account of the particulars of the Triumphal Entry by comparing and correlating the four accounts. The second is to examine the significance of this episode, again in light of the individual gospel records.

- a. As noted, the four accounts of this episode have many similarities as well as many differences. Generally speaking, the three synoptic gospels are very close, with only relatively minor differences (Luke being the most thorough). For instance, Matthew spoke of a donkey and its colt while Mark and Luke only mentioned the colt, emphasizing that no one had ever sat on it. So Mark and Luke included the conversation surrounding taking the colt (though they differ in details), which Matthew omitted. On the other hand, Matthew and Mark agree in placing the anointing at Bethany *after* their record of the Triumphal Entry, but their accounts of the anointing don't seem to indicate a chronological sequence as John's does. Both Matthew and Mark introduce the anointing episode with phrases that can be rendered, *and when He [Jesus] was in Bethany*, suggesting that they were treating it as a flashback within the surrounding narrative, a view which the context readily supports (cf. Matthew 26:1-5; Mark 14:1-2). Thus it seems best to follow John's chronology which has Jesus' ride into Jerusalem taking place on the day following His anointing (ref. 12:12).

If the Synoptic writers differ in various details of their respective accounts, John's is by far the most unique. Unlike his counterparts, he made no mention of Jesus dispatching two of His disciples to retrieve the colt and its mother, instead noting only in passing that Jesus "found a young donkey" (12:14). He also uniquely commented on the disciples' initial failure to grasp the significance of Jesus' ride into Jerusalem (12:16). Even more significantly, John completely omitted the temple episode which followed upon the Triumphal Entry (cf. Matthew 21:17ff; Mark 11:12ff; Luke 19:45ff). Luke's account of Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem and what followed is the most extensive, but all three of the synoptists saw fit to record this content. John restricted his narrative to the entry event itself and the rulers' and people's response to it (12:17-19). Edersheim's summary is apt:

"The Synoptists accompany Him from Bethany, while John, in accordance with the general scheme of his narrative, seems to follow from Jerusalem that multitude which, on tidings of His approach, hastened to meet Him.

Harmonizing the four gospel records, then, results in the following general account of the episode of Jesus' triumphal entrance into Jerusalem:

- On the day following His anointing in Bethany, Jesus instructed two of His disciples to go into the nearby village (possibly Bethphage), locate a donkey and her colt and untie them and bring them back to Him. He also instructed them what they were to say if anyone asked them what they were doing. These disciples found the animals just as Jesus had told them and, after giving an explanation to the owners (*bystanders* in Mark's account), they returned with them.
- The disciples placed garments on the colt and Jesus sat on it. Because the colt was still with its mother, it's likely the disciples led the female donkey such that her colt, with Jesus sitting on him, followed behind. Word had spread that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem and the people began streaming out of the city and the surrounding fields to meet Him. As they lined the road they took their garments along with tree branches (John mentioned only palm branches) and spread them out before Jesus.
- And as they did this they cried out, reciting a section from Psalm 118 and proclaiming Jesus to be the Messiah, the Son of David. The significance of this will be discussed more fully in the next section, but here it's worth mentioning that the Jews chanted this Psalm in prayer as the climactic final portion of the *Hallel* (Psalms 113-118), which they recited at various holy observances including the three "pilgrim feasts" of Passover, Weeks (Pentecost) and Tabernacles. Irritated and resentful of the crowd's proclamation, the Pharisees present with them on the road called out to Jesus to rebuke and silence them. He replied that their words of affirmation and praise could not be silenced; if somehow their mouths were closed, the very stones would pick up where they left off.

- But even while the people were shouting praises to Him, proclaiming Him Israel's Messiah and King and paying homage to Him by lining His path with their garments and leafy branches, Jesus was deeply burdened and agonized in His spirit. As He approached Jerusalem, He wept and cried out in anguish over the city's woeful plight: This place where Yahweh had put His name and directed His people to commune with Him – the city that most epitomized the relationship between Him and His covenant “son” – had become the epicenter of Israel's unbelief and rebellion. In the sharpest of ironies, the people's praises masked the truth that they had missed the day of their visitation; all that remained for them and Jerusalem was Yahweh's just recompense. Soon these triumphant shouts would be replaced by wailing and shrieks of pain and death.

- By the time Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was aware of His presence and excitement filled the streets. Matthew recorded that Jesus went to the temple and began healing all those who gathered around Him, only heightening the size and enthusiasm of the crowd. So also the exultant hosannas continued, even being picked up by the children who were present. Once again the ruling authorities objected and called upon Jesus to denounce their words, but He answered them as He had the Pharisees on the road: *This day demanded His praise*; it was ordained by His Father and would not be restrained or withdrawn.

- Because the evening was approaching, Jesus left the temple and Jerusalem and retired with the Twelve to Bethany for the night. But the following day He returned to the city, stopping along the way to examine a fig tree for fruit for His morning meal. But finding it devoid of figs (which He fully expected, since it wasn't the season for its fruit), He pronounced upon it the curse of perpetual barrenness. When Jesus and His disciples arrived in Jerusalem He went again into the temple where He commenced overturning the transaction tables and driving out the buyers and sellers who were doing business there in preparation for the Passover. (Luke's record gives the impression that Jesus did this after He rode into the city, but he likely conjoined the two events because he recognized that they functioned together in their purpose and meaning; the overnight stay in Bethany was simply an interlude and so he chose not to record it.)

Again, this temple action parallels John's account of Jesus' first public Passover (2:13ff), leading some scholars to believe that he misplaced it – whether intentionally or unintentionally – at the beginning of Jesus' ministry rather than at the end where it actually occurred. But if, as it seems, Jesus performed the same actions at both His first and final Passovers, then these twin episodes need to be viewed as important bookends to His messianic mission and work; if the first temple incident helped to lay the *foundation* of Jesus' self-presentation and self-interpretation to Israel, the second one served as a kind of *capstone* to that work. This, too, will be considered in the next section.