

Poetic License

Here's another example of how even the most basic, simple Bible narrative can get seriously derailed. It leaves you wondering, how in the world could the omniscient God screw that up? Well, like this.

Matthew 21:1-9:

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.

What a strange scenario this is! What an absurd Bible passage! How ridiculous to think Jesus would (or could) straddle a donkey and a colt at the same time and ride them into Jerusalem. What was Matthew (or whoever wrote this gospel) thinking? The other gospels get it right, stating that Jesus rode a colt. What's Matthew's problem?

It's even more clear in the NRSV exactly what Matthew is saying. This translation is closer to the Greek manuscript.

Matthew 21:7:

they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them.

Matthew is not saying Jesus rode only one animal at a time, or rode one and pulled the other behind. He is saying Jesus rode both animals at the same time. Is that even physically possible?

Matthew's problem is that he doesn't understand the Hebrew language. He is well aware of the prophecy found in Zechariah 9:9 . . .

**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.**

. . . and he is determined to show how such Old Testament prophecies are fulfilled in the New Testament. If Zechariah says he rode a donkey and a colt, then that's the way Matthew must write the story. Not because he witnessed Jesus straddle a donkey and a colt, but because that's what OT prophecy requires, for reasons beyond Matthew's desire to question.

But, Matthew is wrong. He doesn't understand that in Hebrew there was a commonly used literary technique called *synonymous parallelism*. Two lines of poetry say the same thing in different words. It was a poetic convention, not to be taken literally.

This is a perfect example of the Gospel writers who say what they think to be true, what they think the Bible should say, and what they think we need to hear. They are not apostles who were eyewitnesses to Jesus' ministry, reporting the facts of what actually happened. Each NT author has a particular ax to grind, a particular agenda, and therefore a particular slant in his writings. This is the result.