

3. *The triumphal entry (12:12–19)*

Because this is one of relatively few incidents in the life of Jesus that is reported in all four Gospels (cf. Mt. 21:1–11; Mk. 11:1–11; Lk. 19:29–38), there has been much discussion not only on the peculiar emphases found in each Gospel but also on the question of whether John had Mark or some other Synoptic Gospel before him when he wrote. On the latter question, there is still no consensus.³ As for the former, some of the more important divergences in John will be noted.

12:12. For the time reference *next day*, cf. notes on v. 1. This is presumably Sunday of passion week. The *great crowd* is made up of pilgrims who have come to Jerusalem *for the Feast*, i.e. for Passover. Josephus (Bel. vi. 422–425) describes one Passover, just before the Jewish War (≈ AD 66–70), when 2,700,000 people took part, not counting the defiled and the foreigners who were present in the city. Even if his numbers are inflated, the crowds were undoubtedly immense. The assumption in this verse and the next is that Jesus was met on the road from Bethany by pilgrims who had already reached Jerusalem, and who went out to meet him once they heard he was approaching. Many of these pilgrims would have been Galileans who were familiar with his ministry; many others would have heard of the raising of Lazarus (cf. 11:55–57) and eagerly sought an opportunity to see Jesus. Dodd (HTFG, p. 156) and others suggest that John's account is the story that would be told by someone in Jerusalem who heard of Jesus' approach, and the Synoptic account is the story that would be told by one of the pilgrims on the road who accompanied Jesus. But this is too antithetical an approach: two of the Synoptics report that there were crowds before and behind (Mt. 11:9; Mk. 11:9; cf. Carson, Matt, p. 439), apparently an indirect confirmation of John's report (cf. especially vv. 17, 18).

12:13. There was little difficulty obtaining *palm branches*: date palms were plentiful

³ In favour of Johannine dependence on one or more of the Synoptics are Barrett, pp. 415ff.; and Edwin D. Freed, JBL 80, 1961, pp. 329–338. The best treatment against dependence is that of Smith, Essays, pp. 97–105. Both sides, regrettably, think only in terms of the descent of tradition through various intermediaries, and never consider the possibility of eyewitness reportage with its own theological bent. That possibility does not resolve the issue of dependence; indeed, it could be made to favour either view. But it must not be left out of the discussion. Cf. Introduction, §§ II, III.

around Jerusalem, and still grow there. But there is nothing in the Old Testament that prescribes palm branches at Passover, whereas the people were commanded to take ‘palm fronds ... and rejoice before the LORD your God’ at the Feast of Tabernacles. This is one of the factors that prompted T. W. Manson to argue that the triumphal entry actually took place six months earlier and was transferred to this setting.⁴ In fact, this expedient is unnecessary. From about two centuries earlier, palm branches had already become a national (not to say nationalist) symbol. When Simon the Maccabee drove the Syrian forces out of the Jerusalem citadel he was fêted with music and the waving of palm branches (cf. [1 Macc. 13:51](#), ¹141 BC), which had also been prominent at the rededication of the temple ([2 Macc. 10:7](#), ¹164 BC). Apocalyptic visions of the end utilize palm branches (*Testament of Naphtali 5*). Palms appear on the coins struck by the insurgents during the Jewish wars against Rome (¹AD 66–70, ¹132–135); indeed, the use of the palm as a symbol for Judea was sufficiently well established that the coins struck by the Romans to celebrate their victory also sported it.⁵ In short, waving of palm branches was no longer restrictively associated with Tabernacles. In this instance, it may well have signalled nationalist hope that a messianic liberator was arriving on the scene (cf. [6:14–15](#)).


The cry *Hosanna!*, originally a transliteration of Hebrew *hôšî‘â nā’* (lit. ‘give salvation now’), had come to be a term of acclamation or praise. Every Jew knew of its occurrence in [Psalm 118:25](#), for [Psalm 118](#) is part of the Hallel ([Pss. 113–118](#)), sung each morning by the temple choir during the Feast of Tabernacles (cf. notes on [7:37](#)) but also associated at this period with the Feast of Dedication (on which cf. [10:22](#); [2 Macc. 1:9](#); [10:6](#)) and with the Passover (cf. [Mishnah Pesahim 5:7](#); [9:3](#); [10:7](#)). Indeed, at Tabernacles at least (and possibly at the other Feasts), every man and boy waved his *lûlāb* (a few shoots of willow and myrtle tied with palm) when the choir reached the *Hosanna!* in [Psalm 118:25](#). The connection was so strong that many Jews referred to their lulabs as hosannas.

The succeeding words are also drawn from [Psalm 118](#). *Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord* (cf. [Ps. 118:26](#)) originally conferred a blessing on the pilgrim heading up to Jerusalem: ‘in the name of the Lord’ modified ‘Blessed’. It is possible that in the psalm

⁴ [BJRL](#) 33, 1950–51, pp. 272–298.

⁵ H. St. J. Hart, [JTS](#) 3, 1952, pp. 172–198; cf. [Bruce](#), p. 176 n. 8.

the welcome and blessing were pronounced upon a Davidic king (though that is not explicitly said). Certainly in the Midrash on [Psalm 118](#) this line is understood messianically: the one who comes is the Messiah (*Midrash Tehillim* 244a; cf. [SB](#) 1.150). So here; the crowds do not simply pronounce a blessing in the name of the Lord on the one who comes, but pronounce a blessing on the one who comes in the name of the Lord. The next line shows that this is the way the crowd understands their own words: *Blessed is the King of Israel* is not a quotation from [Psalm 118](#), but messianic identification of ‘he who comes in the name of the Lord’. Something similar is reported by Luke ([19:38](#)). For the title ‘King of Israel’, cf. notes on [1:49](#); [18:37](#); [19:19](#).

[12:14–15](#). The Synoptists here preserve much more information, and make it clear that [Jesus](#) arranged for the ride on the ass, thereby self-consciously fulfilling the prophecy of [Zechariah 9:9](#). John cuts out these arrangements, and briefly reports, *Jesus found a young donkey* (the verb certainly allows room for the meaning ‘to find by the agency of others’, as [Barrett](#), p. 418, points out, but it shows no interest in it). The expression *young donkey* (*onarion*) confirms that he rode a young animal (Mark specifies that it was unbroken), but again John makes nothing of it. The text does not specify when [Jesus](#) began his ride. Perhaps [Jesus](#) set his arrangements in motion, then began his journey into Jerusalem on foot, with the clamour of the crowd on every side, only to be met by his disciples bringing the animal for him to ride. Whatever the exact sequence, to report the ride on the donkey immediately after the acclamation of the crowd has the effect of damping down nationalist expectations. He does not enter Jerusalem on a war horse (cf. [Is. 31:1–3](#); [1 Ki. 4:26](#)), which would have whipped the political aspirations of the vast crowds into insurrectionist frenzy, but he chooses to present himself as the king who comes in peace, ‘gentle and riding on a donkey’ ([Zc. 9:9](#)) .

The quotation bears closer inspection. The opening words, *Do not be afraid*, are found neither in the Hebrew nor in any version of [Zechariah 9:9](#), and replace ‘Rejoice greatly’. Quite likely they are drawn from [Isaiah 40:9](#), where they are addressed to the one who brings good tidings to Zion. It is not uncommon for New Testament quotations from the Old Testament to derive from two or more passages (e.g. [Mt. 27:9–10](#); [Mk. 1:2–3](#)). *Daughter of Zion*, drawn from [Zechariah 9:9](#), is a common way of referring to the people of Jerusalem, especially in their guise as the oppressed or fallen people of God. The rest of the quotation is an abridgment of [Zechariah 9:9](#). Like many New Testament

quotations from the Old, however, the entire Old Testament context must be borne in mind if the full force of the words is to be recognized. After the promise of the coming of the gentle king, God further promises, ‘I will take away the chariots from Ephraim and the war-horses 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 [*i.e.* the Euphrates] to the ends of the earth. As for you, because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will free your prisoners from the waterless pit’ (Zc. 9:10, 11). Three points stand out: (1) The coming of the gentle king is associated with the cessation of war : this, too, was understood by John as defining the work of Jesus in such a way that he could never be reduced to an enthusiastic Zealot. (2) The coming of the gentle king is associated with the proclamation of peace to the nations, extending his reign to the ends of the earth . The latter half of Zechariah 9:10 is itself a quotation from Psalm 72:8, which promises a world-wide reign for Zion’s king, a son of David. (3) The coming of the gentle king is associated with the blood of God’s covenant that spells release for prisoners —themes already precious to John (*cf.* 1:29, 34; 3:5; 6:35–58; 8:31–34), and associated with Passover and with the death of the servant-king that lies immediately ahead.

12:16. This verse closely resembles John’s remark about what the disciples did not understand when Jesus talked about destroying the temple and raising it in three days: ‘After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the Scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken’ (2:22). There, the crucial turning point in their understanding took place ‘after he was raised from the dead’; here, it is *after Jesus was glorified*. But this amounts to virtually the same thing. Jesus’ death marked the turning point. It was part of the movement that led on to his resurrection and exaltation, *i.e.* his glorification, and the bestowal of the Spirit that was conditioned by it (7:39; 16:7).

Barrett (pp. 416, 417) and others detect an intolerable contradiction. If the disciples did not understand that Jesus’ use of the ass fulfills prophecy, making Jesus the promised messianic king, then how is it that the crowds hail him as the King of Israel (v. 13)? Surely it cannot be thought that their understanding is better than that of Jesus’ most intimate followers? Barrett therefore reasons that John has composed this verse to stress the theological centrality of Jesus’ glorification, but has failed to note that in so

doing he has written incredible ‘history’.

The cogency of this argument turns on identifying the *these things* that the disciples did not understand with the confession of Jesus as the messianic king. But in John’s narrative the crowds confess Jesus as the King of Israel *before* Zechariah 9:9 is introduced. Jesus refuses to reinforce their political and nationalist aspirations by riding on a war horse or by stirring up insurrection against the Romans. Rather, he takes steps to enter Jerusalem on a donkey, fulfilling rather different Old Testament promises. The full significance of this parabolic action and the Scripture on which it was based (summarized in the notes on 14–15) neither the disciples nor the crowd grasped until after Jesus had been glorified and the Holy Spirit poured out (14:26; 16:12–15).

As in 2:22 (cf. notes), far from decreasing the historical plausibility of the narrative, the disciples’ misunderstanding increases it. Not only is their failure to comprehend the nature of Jesus’ kingship and the inevitability of the cross universally attested in the Gospels, that failure was also something that *could not* be misunderstood *after* Jesus’ death and glorification. Christians could scarcely be thought to be Christians without understanding these fundamentals, and Jews in any sort of intimate dialogue with Christians would also understand what Christians meant. They might not *believe* their interpretation of the Old Testament Scriptures, but there could not easily be a profound misunderstanding of what was meant by these things. For such readers, this passage comes not to relieve misunderstanding but better to ground fledgling understanding, and to explain the evolution of the thinking of the first Christians by basing their change of perspective and comprehension in the glorification of Jesus Christ.

12:17–18. Two crowds are depicted in these verses. The first crowd is the one *that was with him when he called Lazarus from the tomb*. This may have included a number of folk from Bethany, and perhaps a substantial number of others who had been present at the raising of Lazarus (11:45) and who had been invited back to the dinner in honour of Jesus (12:2). They would not be suppressed, and bore witness (Gk. *emartyrei*, NIV ‘spread the word’) to what they had seen, thus magnifying the witness borne by the sign itself (cf. 5:36; 10:38) and serving as models for all who bear witness to the truth. The other came out from Jerusalem to meet him (cf. 12:12), stimulated in part by the reports of the miracle.

12:19. Doubtless the scene was fraught with potential explosiveness. Jesus could have

begun an armed revolt then and there. The Pharisees observe the crowds and are greatly disquieted. Less accommodating to the Roman overlords than the Sadducees, they nevertheless thought that the path of wisdom was to endure the occupation, and chafe under their perception of Jesus' rising popularity. The Sanhedrin has taken its decision (11:49–53), but has to execute it with stealth because of the crowds; meanwhile, so far as the Pharisees are concerned, Jesus goes from strength to strength, and the political stability becomes more and more fragile: *See, this is getting us nowhere.*

But in the report of their closing statement, there is not only hyperbole and exaggeration—*Look how the whole world has gone after him!*—but superb Johannine irony as well. By *the world*, the Pharisees mean 'everyone', *i.e.* everyone in the Jerusalem area, including the pilgrims from all over the Mediterranean basin and beyond. But *the world* (*kosmos*; *cf.* notes on 1:9) commonly refers in the Fourth Gospel to people everywhere without racial distinction but who are lost and in rebellion against God (*cf.* notes on 3:16, 17). In truth the aim of Jesus' mission was to save the world (3:17). The crowd that acclaims Jesus as the King of Israel anticipates the broader sweep of humanity that will enjoy Jesus' saving reign. As the plots of the Pharisees and their colleagues were not proving very effective in reducing Jesus' popularity, so the later attempts to stem the rising tide of Christianity proved exasperating. And nothing so confirms that the world was even then beginning to go after Jesus as the visit of 'some Greeks' (v. 20) whose request to meet Jesus triggers the onset of the 'hour'. At the same time, there is probably irony within irony. For by the end of the chapter John will insist that the overwhelming reaction to Jesus was unbelief (12:37ff.), so that here, as elsewhere (2:23–25; 6:60; 8:30ff.), the Evangelist does not accord a very high place to the crowd's positive response to Jesus. Thus, both levels of irony point forward to the dominant themes in the rest of [John 12](#).