Matthew 21 Quotations from the Hebrew Bible, collected by Janet

2021-11-28

1. Matthew 21: 4-5: This took place to fulfil what was spoken by the prophet, saying, "Tell the daughter of Zion, Behold, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on an ass, and on a colt, the foal of an ass."
2. Zechariah 9: 9: Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on an ass, on a colt the foal of an ass.
3. Was this one animal or two?
4. A convention of Biblical poetry is parallelism, where the same idea is repeated in slightly different words.
5. The Hebrew contains the particle vav (וְ) which can be translated “and,” or not translated – a case can be made for either one animal or two based on the Hebrew text.
6. The Septuagint translation also uses the word “and” (καὶ).
7. Matthew seems to imply two animals. Matthew 21: 7: they brought the ass and the colt, and put their garments on them, and he sat thereon.
8. Jesus might have sat on one (the mother?) and led the other (the foal?), or he might have alternated between them.
9. The verse in Zechariah is preceded by warnings against hostile nations, the judgment that they will be integrated into Judah (Zechariah 9: 7: …Those who are left will belong to our God and become a clan in Judah…), and God’s assurance, “…Never again will an oppressor overrun my people, for now I am keeping watch. (Zechariah 9: 8)”
10. Some read Zechariah 9: 9 as emphasizing the gentleness and humility of the king, who chooses to enter the city on a beast of burden rather than a warhorse.
11. Zechariah 9: 11 has overtones of disarmament and pacifism: “I will take away the chariots from Ephraim and the warhorses 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 to the ends of the earth.”
12. Matthew 21: 13: He said to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer'; but you make it a den of robbers."
13. Isaiah 56: 6-7: "And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants, every one who keeps the sabbath, and does not profane it, and holds fast my covenant-- these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.
14. Jeremiah 7: 11: Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes? Behold, I myself have seen it, says the LORD.
15. Some scholars have perceived a third writer of the book of Isaiah beginning at chapter 56.
16. The section begins with a promise of salvation, “Thus says the LORD: "Keep justice, and do righteousness, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed.” (Isaiah 56: 1). The promise extends to eunuchs and foreigners and concludes, “Thus says the Lord GOD, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather yet others to him besides those already gathered." (Isaiah 56: 8)
17. I have visited synagogues with a sign near the entrance, “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.” It makes me feel welcome.
18. Mark includes the full quotation: “And he taught, and said to them, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'?” (Mark 11: 17), but Matthew and Luke (Luke 19: 46) both leave out “for all the nations.”
19. The quotation from Jeremiah is from a sermon Jeremiah delivered at the entrance to the Temple (Jeremiah 7: 1-2).
20. Jeremiah’s sermon is a warning to those who believe the Temple will protect them, even though they “…steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, burn incense to Ba'al, and go after other gods that you have not known.” (Jeremiah 7: 9) He reminds the people of the earlier sanctuary at Shiloh, and concludes, “therefore I will do to the house which is called by my name, and in which you trust, and to the place which I gave to you and to your fathers, as I did to Shiloh.” (Jeremiah 7: 14)
21. In fact, both the Temple where Jeremiah preached and the Temple that Jesus cleansed were destroyed.
22. Compare the end of Jeremiah 7: 11 to the end of Zechariah 9: 8. God is watching.
23. Jeremiah 7: 11: “Behold, I myself have seen it” (אָנֹכִי הִנֵּה רָאִיתִי )
24. Zechariah 9: 8: “for now I am keeping watch.” (כִּי עַתָּה רָאִיתִי בְעֵינָֽי) The King James Version is a more literal translation: “for now have I seen with mine eyes.”
25. Matthew 21: 16: and they said to him, "Do you hear what these are saying?" And Jesus said to them, "Yes; have you never read, 'Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings thou hast brought perfect praise'?"
26. Ps 8: 1-2: To the choirmaster: according to The Gittith. A Psalm of David. O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is thy name in all the earth! Thou whose glory above the heavens is chanted by the mouth of babes and infants, thou hast founded a bulwark because of thy foes, to still the enemy and the avenger.
27. Ps 8 is entirely praise and awe – no petitions, thanksgiving, or lament.
28. Robert Alter’s note on “from the mouth of babes and sucklings:” The meaning of this phrase, however proverbial it has become, has not been satisfactorily explained. One distinct possibility: God draws strength from consciously aware humankind, made in His image, even from its weakest and youngest members, against the inhuman forces of chaos. Perhaps the innocence of infants is imagined as a source of strength.
29. The Hebrew word “oz” (עֹז), translated “bulwark” by the Revised Standard Version, is also translated as “strength” or “might.” For example, Psalm 84: 5: “Blessed are the men whose strength (עֽוֹז ) is in thee…” or 2 Samuel 6: 14: “And David danced before the LORD with all his might (עֹז)…”
30. This leads to various translations of Psalm 8: 2:
31. KJV: Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings hast thou ordained strength because of thine enemies, …
32. NIV: Through the praise of children and infants you have established a stronghold against your enemies, …
33. JPS: Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings hast Thou founded strength, Because of Thine adversaries; …
34. Robert Alter: From the mouth of babes and sucklings you have founded strength on account of your foes …
35. The Septuagint translation of Psalm 8: 2 goes in a different direction: “ἐκ στόματος νηπίων καὶ θηλαζόντων κατηρτίσω αἶνον….” This is the same as Matthew 21: 16: “ Ἐκ στόματος νηπίων καὶ θηλαζόντων κατηρτίσω αἶνον,” and might be translated: “…Out of the mouth of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise for yourself…”
36. Matthew 21: 42: Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the scriptures: 'The very stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner; this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes'?
37. Psalm 118: 21-23: I thank thee that thou hast answered me and hast become my salvation. The stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner. This is the LORD's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.
38. Psalm 118 gives thanks to God for deliverance from adversity. Some believe that it was used collectively (by the king and the people?), rather than by one individual.
39. Matthew quotes the Septuagint translation directly.
40. Psalm 118: 18: The LORD has chastened me sorely, but he has not given me over to death.” This gives the impression of the psalmist as one of God’s faithful people throughout. On the other hand, Matthew draws the conclusion in Matthew 21: 43, “Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation producing the fruits of it."

Sources:

* Barbara E. Reid, O.P., The Gospel According to Matthew, 2005
* Robert Alter, The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary, 2019
* www.blueletterbible.org

Scripture quotations are from the Revised Standard Version (RSV) except where noted.