

The Red Rider and the Beast of Burden

Zechariah 1:8 and 9:9-10

The Sunday before Easter is called Palm Sunday. It gets its name from the triumphal procession of Messiah into the City of David. As he rides through town, the people are cutting branches off of trees and throwing them into the road. They cry **Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!** The entry of our King into his Royal City is strange, for he approaches on the back of a beast of burden: a donkey! Here is something astonishing! The Lord of Sabaoth – the Warrior God of Armies – sits aloft a disgraceful pack animal!

Why? Why does God choose such a paradoxical inauguration ceremony for his kingship? Matthew and John's accounts tells us that Jesus does this to fulfill prophecy. **Zechariah 9:9-10** says, "**Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout in triumph, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; He is just and endowed with salvation, Humble, and mounted on a donkey, Even on a colt, the foal of a donkey. And I will**

cut off the chariot from Ephraim, And the horse from Jerusalem; And the bow of war will be cut off. And He will speak peace to the nations; And His dominion will be from sea to sea, And from the River to the ends of the earth.”

This says *that* the Righteous Branch will mount a donkey, but it still doesn't answer *why* God chooses to use a donkey. In order to see more clearly the meaning of this, we need to consider this same King as he is mounted upon another beast in the same book of Zechariah: the great red steed of Zechariah 1:8. “I saw at night, and behold, a man was riding on a red horse, and he was standing among the myrtle trees which were in the ravine (*by the deep*), with red, sorrel (*tan or brown*), and white horses behind him.

Zechariah had eight night visions. They are found between 1:7 and 6:8. Among these is the familiar story of Joshua the high priest being accused by Satan and pardoned by the Lord, who had forgiven him of his sinfulness and been given wonderful new priestly garments. Zechariah 1:8 is

the beginning of these night visions and it is truly the foundational verse for all of them, as it is for the rest of the book.

THE MAN

In this first vision, Zechariah sees a man on a red horse standing among myrtle trees. **Who is this man?** That it is not an ordinary man is made clear by verse 11. Here this man is identified as “**The Angel of the LORD** who was standing among the myrtle trees.” Now, there are *two* angels in this story. One talks directly to Zechariah (**vs. 9**). He is not the Angel of the **LORD**. *The* Angel of angels speaks to the messenger angel. Once we understand this, we understand that the term “**LORD**” (*Yahweh, the proper name for God*) is used to identify the Angel of the **LORD** in verse 13, “**The LORD** spoke kind and comforting words to the angel who talked with me.” In other words, the Angel of the **LORD** is God, Yahweh!

In the OT, when God comes to people in the particular form of a “man” or an “angel” we call this a **theophany**, literally a *God-appearance*.” The Angel of the **LORD** and a

man who is worshiped come many times in the OT. I was intrigued when I saw that the first time the title “Angel of the **LORD**” is used is when he appears to Hagar by a spring of water in the wilderness after Sarai had despised her.

It is clear that this Angel is no ordinary angel, but God himself. For he says, “***I will greatly multiply your descendants so that they shall be too many to count***” (**Gen 16:10**). Only God has the power to multiply descendants. It was the Angel of the Lord who stopped Abraham’s hand from killing Isaac saying, “***Now I know that you love God, for you have not withheld your son from Me***” (**Gen 22:12**). Again, it is clear this Angel is God! Sometimes he is not called the Angel, but merely “a man.” On one occurrence, this man shows up and wrestles with Jacob throughout the night that his brother Esau was trying to chase him down. This man wrenches Jacob’s hip out of socket. Of that experience Jacob named the place Peniel, saying, “***It is because I saw God face to face***” (**Gen 32:30**). This “man” is God! In Zechariah, the man who is God and the angel who is God are identified as the same person.

John the Revelator sees basically the same vision that Zechariah sees. He says, “And I saw heaven opened; and behold, a white horse, and He who sat upon it is called Faithful and True; and in righteousness He judges and wages war. And His eyes are a flame of fire, and upon His head are many diadems; and He has a name written upon Him which no one knows except Himself. And He is clothed with a robe dipped in blood; and His name is called The Word of God. And the armies which are in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean, were following Him on white horses” (Rev 19:11-14). This time the color of the horse has changed, but the rider is still the same. We understand the change in color to be a change in time frames that the visions are to occur. The color has changed because John sees the man on the other side of Calvary. Now, this man has been glorified, and white represents this.

The man, identified here are “The Word of God” (the term John uses in his Gospel to identify Jesus Christ), is the commander of a great host, an army of horsemen who will

come to wage war on the earth in the final conflict. Zechariah sees the man on a *red* horse with two (or three) other groups of horsemen perched atop brown and white horses, sitting behind the Red Rider. He is their commander and their purpose at the time of Zechariah is to “patrol the earth” (Zech 1:10), not to wage war. Though the military purposes are different for the horsemen, the commander is the same person in both places. It is God, our Lord Jesus Christ, the Commander of Armies, the **LORD** of Hosts.

Horsemen

I am always curious to discover the meaning of symbolism if it is possible, for it helps me to think about the spiritual reality being discussed in a passage. It seems to me that God never does things arbitrarily. Even the colors of horses have some sort of meaning, especially if they are visions. In both Zechariah and Revelation, there are different colored horses. **Meredith Kline** proposes that the red, brown, and white colors of the horses in Revelation may be “designed to create the impression of

flames and light.”¹ If this is true, it is not the only place in Scripture where reds and orange/browns and whites are used to produce the image of fire. “Flame colored linen was used for the inside covering of the tabernacle (cf. Ex 26:1, 31, 36). There too it was a matter of giving visual expression to the Name of God, Yahweh of hosts, in an earthly replica of the Glory-court of heaven, where the heavenly hosts were represented by cherubim figures, portrayed in the fiery curtains as well as in gleaming golden sculpted form above the ark... Zechariah saw the same reality that was found in the tabernacle, that reproduction of the Glory-Spirit realm where the Lord reigns on chariot throne as flaming fire, amid ten thousand times ten thousand of holy ones.”²

If this is at all true, then pictured here are both the Second *and Third* persons of the Trinity. Both have the task of watching over this earth at this time, particularly in the sense of seeing what the nations are doing, and particularly what they are doing to God’s holy people.

¹ Kline, *The Rider of the Red Horse*. At www.kerux.com.

² Ibid.

In Zechariah's day God's people were restricted to the nation of Israel and any foreigners who became part of the Jewish nation. But Zechariah says in chapter 2 – just a few verses from now - that a day is coming when Jerusalem will be “a city without walls because of the great number of men and livestock in it” (Zech 2:4). The meaning of why this will happen is made clear in 2:11, “Many nations will be joined with the Lord in that day and will become my people.”

I bring this up because it is very relevant to understanding this passage from a pastoral point of view. I want you to consider the meaning of Christ mounted upon a horse. The imagery is clearly that of war or of preparing for war. Look at how angry the Angel of the **LORD** is here. He says, “I am exceedingly jealous for Jerusalem and Zion. "But I am very angry with the nations who are at ease; for while I was only a little angry, they furthered the disaster... Then I lifted up my eyes and looked, and behold, there were four horns. So I said to the angel who was speaking with me, ‘What are these?’ And he answered

me, ‘These are the horns which have scattered Judah, Israel, and Jerusalem.’ Then the LORD showed me four craftsmen. And I said, ‘What are these coming to do?’ And he said, ‘These are the horns which have scattered Judah, so that no man lifts up his head; but these craftsmen have come to terrify them, to throw down the horns of the nations who have lifted up their horns against the land of Judah in order to scatter it’ (Zech 1:14-15, 18-21). God is angry here with the nations at ease (a sermon in and of itself). In this way, when Christ is mounted upon a horse, he is coming in judgment and in wrath.

I don’t want to give away the end of this story too early, but needless to say for most of us sitting here this morning, Zechariah’s vision cannot be one of comfort and good news to any of us if Christ enters his royal city mounted upon a flaming stallion, because most of us are “the nations” (Gentiles) who God is angry with in Zechariah’s vision. In order for the prophesy of chapter 2 and the nations becoming God’s people to take place, something unprecedented must take place.

MYRTLE TREES

Let us go back to verse 1:8 now for a moment, because there is more that we need to understand about this text. It says that the red horsemen is “standing among the myrtle trees.” The myrtle trees are the reason why this text becomes good news to God’s people. The idea here is that the presence of God is in the midst of these trees, protecting them and surrounding them with his presence, just as the glory cloud protected Israel in the wilderness and the glory of the Lord filled the temple in Solomon’s day.

There is also here the idea that the flaming presence of God is right there in the midst of these trees, yet they are not consumed. This has been seen before. When God came to Moses the first time you will recall that the Angel came in fire in a small tree that was not consumed. The people themselves had a similar experience when the fire came to the mountain. And they said, “Behold, Yahweh our God has showed us his Glory and his Greatness and we have heard his voice from the midst of the fire. We have seen

today that God can speak with man and he can still live" (Deut. 5:24)!

This is also symbolized in Revelation where one like a son of man stands like a fiery flaming furnace in the midst of seven golden lampstands. The lampstands are the churches of Christ.

Let us return to the myrtle. A myrtle tree is a type of evergreen. Evergreens as you know from their name and experience remain green throughout the year. While other trees lose their green for a season, such is not true of the evergreen. In this way, they symbolize perpetual life. In Ezekiel's vision of the eschatological temple, he sees a river flowing from the throne-room, coming out of the walls, going all the way from Babylon to the Jordan River. Its waters make all things live, even the salty waters of the dead sea. Along the shores of this river are multitudes of trees and it is said of these trees that their fruit will not fail and their leaves will not wither (Ezek 47:7, 12). John gives the same imagery in the last chapter of the Bible. In other words, the trees will be evergreen! During the time before this last day miracle takes place, the evergreen symbolizes

the future eternal life that was pictured by the tree of life in Eden.

Myrtles show up elsewhere in the Bible of course. The Myrtle tree was designated along with the olive and palm tree to be the wood used in the making of the booths people were to construct for the feast of tabernacles. Now, you will remember that the feast of tabernacles (or booths) was to last for 7 days, symbolizing the eternal sabbatical rest of God's people. It is called as "assembly" (an *ekklesia* or "church") of the people (Lev 23:36). The people were to make for themselves little huts, little booths or tabernacles to live in. The reason is stated, "so that your generations may know that I had the sons of Israel live in booths when I brought them out from the land of Egypt" (Lev 23:43).

Moses' tabernacle was really nothing but a grand-scale booth. It was a temporary structure built in the wilderness. It showed the people that God was present with them, but that they had not yet entered into the sabbatical rest symbolized by the promised land. I want you to see

through these things – everlasting life in the myrtle, flames that do not consume, an assembly of the people, the Sabbath rest, the temporary tabernacle worship-center, the wilderness etc. that this feast of tabernacle and these myrtle trees symbolize God’s people, even as the lampstands surrounded by flame are the 7 churches. Spurgeon was surely right when he said, “The Church is compared to a myrtle grove flourishing in a valley. It is hidden, unobserved, secreted; courting no honour and attracting no observation from the careless gazer.”³ Beyond this, the imagery of the entire verse shows us that when God is in the midst of the myrtles, he is in the midst of his people, yet not consuming them! What a wonderful and profound mystery of grace this is.

The Deep (The Ravine)

I wish that I had the time to explain to you in depth the next phrase that most of your Bible’s translate as “in the ravine.” The rider is said to be among the myrtles which are in the ravine. Bible commentators usually explain how

³ Spurgeon, *Morning and evening*, Sept 26, 04.

this translation is doubtful. The word *m@f¥lâ* (ravine or basin) is identical in the original Hebrew to the word for the deep (*m@fôlâ*). The only difference is in the uninspired Massoretic vowel pointing.⁴ The overwhelming use of *mslh* in the Bible is “the deep,” which is almost always a watery place.

Zech 10:11 uses the word this way in a related text. “**And He will pass through the sea of distress, And strike the waves in the sea, So that all the depths of the Nile will dry up.**” **The deep is a major biblical theme.** The Spirit and the deep are also often inseparably linked, as I believe they are here in Zechariah. From the beginning of creation where the Spirit hovers over the deep, to the breath/wind (Ruach - the Spirit) of God bringing the deep back in Noah’s day to Pharaoh being drowned by the breath of God in the Sea, to the people crossing the Jordan’s “deep” by the Spirit of God to Jonah being swallowed by the deep and on and on it goes; the deep symbolizes in this present age death and destruction.

⁴ If this means “in the ravine” it is the only time this expression is used in the Bible.

Psalm 18 offers a fascinating point of contact with **Zech 1:8**. In this highly Messianic psalm, the singer cries out to God for salvation. Here we learn that **a mounted rider (vs. 10) surrounded by images of the Spirit** (a canopy of thick clouds surrounding the dark waters [see Gen 1:2ff]) **plucks the singer out of “many waters” (vs. 16)**. Likewise we see the same thing in Jonah’s song. Do you remember what Jonah sang in his time of greatest despair? **“You cast me into the deep... the great deep engulfed me... but you have brought up my life from the pit, O Lord” (Jonah 2:3, 5)**. **This is truly a major theme in the Scripture worthy of your greatest attention.** For it is applied even to our Lord Jesus himself in **Matt 12:40** and other places. Here, Jesus death on the cross is a decent into the deep. It is the **“Sign of Jonah.”** What a heavy burden our Lord underwent on our behalf!

Now we go back to **Zech 1:8** one last time. **The rider stands in the midst of the myrtles which is by the deep waters.** On the last day, John tells us that there will be no more deep, no more sea that is no more death. But for now, in Zechariah’s vision, the Angel of the **LORD** is

going to have to stand between God's people and the death that they all stand so close to. He is going to have to conquer the deep and finally save his people from the valley of the shadow of death.

HOW LONG?

It is remarkable to see that the Angel of the **LORD** awaits with an almost palpable expectation for the time when this might occur. “**HOW LONG?**” is the cry of the Angel of the **LORD** (**1:12**). This is, of course, the cry of all of God's people in all ages. The Psalmist says about the wicked, “**How long, O men, will you turn my glory into shame?**” (**Ps 4:2**). He says about his own sin, “**My soul is in anguish. How long, O LORD, how long? Turn, O LORD, and deliver me**” (**Ps 6:3-4**). Isaiah awaited his ministry towards Israel with this same thought. “**How long must I preach to people who will not listen?**” (**Isa 6:11**). Jeremiah cries out concerning the lying prophets, “**How long will this continue in the hearts of these lying prophets, who prophesy the delusions of their own minds?**” (**Jer 23:26**). And about his own people say says, “**How long will you wander, O unfaithful daughter?**” (**Jer 31:22**). Those who

see visions from God say the same thing. Daniel says, “How long will it be before these astonishing things are fulfilled?” (Dan 12:6) and John says, “How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?” (Rev 6:10).

This “how long” motif in Scripture exemplifies the struggle that all of God’s people have with wickedness in this age. That includes both the unbeliever and themselves, both the world and the church. We can’t help but feel this deep emotion because the Spirit of God within us is crying out for the final redemption.

What is really remarkable here, though, is that this is not a mere man crying out. This is the angel of the Lord! God himself is crying out “how long?” This is not a crying that doesn’t know the future. But it is one that patiently, yet still emotionally, awaits for God to bring his final purposes to completion. Jesus himself in the incarnation expressed this same emotion. “O unbelieving and perverse generation,” Jesus replied, “how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you?” (Mt 17:17).

Living with death and sin is simply not the end of the story. God will have compassion upon his people. This is good news. So the rider comforts the angel here with words of peace. But you must understand something, this peace is not ushered in by riding atop a horse. It can't be. Riding the horse is not the place for the compassion to be shown first, for the horse is a symbol of strength and war. Thus, the Angel of the **LORD** must dismount his mighty stallion and conquer the deep without its beastly strength. He does this by coming in the flesh at a later time in history.

But we have to understand something else. When the rider dismounts his horse, he remains king! Even in the flesh, this Son of Man is king, and he is going to have to sit atop something for his coronation! That this Rider is king is an important theme of Zechariah's book. All of the talk of Zerubbabel, who is the king who rebuilt the temple in Nehemiah's day in chapter four, is a foretelling of things to come. It is a foretelling of Christ!

God tells Zerubbabel in 4:7 that the return of the nation and the temple will not be accomplished by anything but the Spirit of God. The famous verse “not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit, says the Lord” (4:6) is directed to Zerubbabel as he rebuilds the temple. But of course, even the second temple is just a prototype of the real temple, which is Christ himself. Jesus said, “I am able to destroy the temple of God and to rebuild it in three days” (Mat 26:61). He was speaking about the resurrection of his body. He is the true builder of the temple because he is the true heir of King David. Jesus Christ is King Christ!

Like any king, this king has to be anointed in his holy city. He must enter his city straddling his mount. But it will not be by might or by power. The mount must not symbolize this yet. Instead, it will be in another way. The children of Israel were to be looking for another anointing. And, for once in their lives, they actually saw it.

So now we return to Zech 9:9. We read it at the beginning. Zechariah says of this king, “Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout in triumph, O daughter of

Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; He is just and endowed with salvation, **Humble, and mounted on a donkey**, Even on a colt, the foal of a donkey” (Zech 9:9).

This is not some random new vision that Zechariah sees here. It is what must take place based even upon what we have seen in 1:8. This is exactly what was spoken to Judah, the son of Jacob so many centuries before. Listen carefully. Jacob said, “**Judah, your brothers shall praise you; Your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies; Your father's sons shall bow down to you. ‘Judah is a lion's cub; From the prey, my son, you have gone up. He couches, he lies down as a lion, And as a lion, who dares rouse him up?** (This is why Jesus is the lion of Judah – Rev 5:5. This lion is the one who mounts the horse). Then the important words for us appear next,

“**“The scepter shall not depart from Judah, Nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, Until Shiloh (the coming one) comes, And to him shall be the obedience of the peoples. ‘He ties his foal to the vine, And his donkey's**

colt to the choice vine; He washes his garments in wine,
And his robes in the blood of grapes. ‘His eyes are dull
from wine, And his teeth white from milk. (Gen 49:8-12).

Judah’s heir is the owner of the donkey. Why? Kline again tells us that, “A special designation for the donkey is shared by these two passages alone in the Old Testament. It has been found that this particular kind of animal was used in the death-ritual by which ancient covenants were ratified.”⁵ Jesus was of course, about to ratify the New Covenant in less than a week. Kline finishes by saying, “This donkey colt identified the lion of Judah as the lamb of God. Summed up in the two images of the mounted Messiah in Zechariah 1 and 9, the rider of the red horse and the rider of the donkey colt, is the dual status of Jesus as covenant Lord and covenant Servant; his double advent for sacrificial atonement and the judicial conquest; his two-state career of humiliation and exalted glory.”⁶

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

This beast of burden is the perfect animal to mount in order to symbolize the mighty burden that the King would have to take upon himself for his people. And so as the donkey carried his burden into Jerusalem, Suffering Servant was greeted by shouts of “**Hosanna to the Son of David!**” “**Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!**” “**Hosanna in the highest!**” (**Matt 21:9**). And the Righteous Branch is greeted by many branches being thrown at his feet. And the people lay their garments at the feet of him who clothed Joshua the High Priest and our common father Adam in the Garden.

Isn't it true that so many people want the Rider of the White Horse to swath his sword and destroy all of his enemies: *NOW*! In my mind, this was exactly what the people who ushered their King into his royal city also wanted. This cry of *Hosanna* can really only be explained as a moment where the people acted completely out of character - for one reason only - so that prophesy might be fulfilled. Isn't this exactly why these same people who praised him so loudly were so quick to scream insults on him at his death only 5 days later? Entering the city this

way, the Prince of Judah becomes King of Nations. Nothing will stop it. In this event, the Red Rider does not have to wait any longer. There will be no more crying out, “How Long?” Within the week, His long anticipated burden is to be lifted.

It must have been a bittersweet moment, don’t you think; being crowned King before the people through suffering and burden? It is an unimaginable paradox that must be true if the myrtles are to be free of the looming deep that they always stand by. Trusting in this inauguration event and its fulfilled meaning in the cross of Christ is your only escape from the torrents of death and destruction. If you will not trust in the Donkey Rider, then you will be thrown from your own horse, as was Pharaoh and his chariot into the depths of the sea. As Moses sang, “**The horse and its rider He has hurled into the sea**” (**Ex 15:1**).

Look how this is predicted even here in Zechariah. You have already heard the words. Now think upon them in this light. “**And I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim, And the horse from Jerusalem; And the bow of war will be**

cut off” (Zech 9:10a). Zechariah says the same thing later in chapter 12. "In that day," declares the LORD, "I will strike every horse with bewilderment, and his rider with madness. But I will watch over the house of Judah, while I strike every horse of the peoples with blindness. "Then the clans of Judah will say in their hearts, `A strong support for us are the inhabitants of Jerusalem through the LORD of hosts, their God.' (Zech 12:4-5).

If you will not trust, you will be trust from the perch of your own lofty horse, and you will fall into deep, unswimable currents. But Israel, the many nations that have now become God’s people, will be saved. We have read it here in chapter 12 and it is the same back in Zech 9:10b. “And He will speak peace to the nations; And His dominion will be from sea to sea, And from the River to the ends of the earth.”

On this day of salvation, this “Return of the King,” there will be a second ride that takes place. This time will see a ride of victory over all the evil forces that trust themselves against God and his Anointed. The inauguration ride will become the victory lap. You and I stand between these

processions. Our task is to anticipate the second by trusting in the first. Here is the mystery of the ages revealed. It is an already/not yet, time between times that God's people live in currently.

I do not have anymore words of my own to say about this. I have found these two rides of our Lord to be too profound of a mystery for me to leave you with the words of a mere man. Therefore, I want to let God through the Apostle John close our time together.

Give praise to our God, all you His bond-servants, you who fear Him, the small and the great." And I heard, as it were, the voice of a great multitude and as the sound of many waters and as the sound of mighty peals of thunder, saying, "Hallelujah! For the Lord our God, the Almighty, reigns. "Let us rejoice and be glad and give the glory to Him, for the marriage of the Lamb has come and His bride has made herself ready." And it was given to her to clothe herself in fine linen, bright and clean; for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints. And he said to me, "Write, 'Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper

of the Lamb.'" And he said to me, "These are true words of God." And I fell at his feet to worship him. And he said to me, "Do not do that; I am a fellow servant of yours and your brethren who hold the testimony of Jesus; worship God. For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy." And I saw heaven opened; and behold, a white horse, and He who sat upon it is called Faithful and True; and in righteousness He judges and wages war. And His eyes are a flame of fire, and upon His head are many diadems; and He has a name written upon Him which no one knows except Himself. And He is clothed with a robe dipped in blood; and His name is called The Word of God. And the armies which are in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean, were following Him on white horses. And from His mouth comes a sharp sword, so that with it He may smite the nations; and He will rule them with a rod of iron; and He treads the wine press of the fierce wrath of God, the Almighty. And on His robe and on His thigh He has a name written, "KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS" (**Revelation 19:5-16**).

