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September 29th: Zechariah 9 & Matthew 21:1-22

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The Lord's coming judgment on the land. The triumphal entry.

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Transcript

Zechariah chapter 9. I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit. Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope. Today I declare that I will restore to you double, for I have bent Judah as my bow, I have made Ephraim its arrow.

I will stir up your sons, O Zion, against your sons, O Greece, and wield you like a warrior's sword. Then the Lord will appear over them, and his arrow will go forth like lightning. The Lord God will sound the trumpet and will march forth in the whirlwinds of the south.

The Lord of hosts will protect them, and they shall devour and tread down the slingstones, and they shall drink and roar as if drunk with wine, and shall be full like a bowl, drenched like the corners of the altar. On that day the Lord their God will save them as the flock of his people, for like the jewels of a crown they shall shine on his land. For how great is his goodness, and how great his beauty! Grain shall make the young men flourish, and new wine the young women.

In Zechariah chapter 9 we begin a new section of the book. Chapters 9-14 contain two

extended oracles that are marked out by prophetic formulae. The first part of Zechariah ran from chapters 1 to 6 containing the night visions of Zechariah.

Chapters 7-8 transition between those earlier chapters summing up some of their themes and leading us to chapters 9-14 with which the book concludes. The oracles contained in these chapters are extremely difficult to understand and there is little agreement to be found among scholars, many of whom date these prophecies to a period later than that of Zechariah. Determining the events to which these prophecies refer is also difficult, with a considerable range of different positions being held by different scholars, positions that don't map easily onto differences between conservatives and liberals for instance.

Many of the prophecies of these chapters seem quite vague, others more symbolic. Some of these prophecies related to Christ in the New Testament have been taken to be referring specifically to whereas there are other commentators who recognise that Christ is being referred to yet believe that there are more immediate references in view. Given the fact that verse 13 speaks of conflict between the Jews and the Greeks, many commentators think that we might be dealing with the aftermath of the conquest of the land by Alexander the Great.

Our historical knowledge of the relevant periods here is fairly sketchy and as a result it's difficult to rest too much upon any particular connections that we might make. Looking at the chapter more broadly it seems to speak of an invasion and conquest of the land. There are various themes of exodus scattered throughout as well.

In Zechariah chapter 6 in the final one of the night visions, the chariots were sent out from between the two bronze mountains. The Lord was going to shake things up among the nations. And in this chapter we see the movement of the Lord starting with Syria, down to Phoenicia and then to Philistia.

Moving from north to south the Lord is acting within the land. Having discovered an Assyrian stele with a reference to Hadrach, we know that it was one of the cities of the region. The full extent of the boundaries of the promised land that are mentioned in various parts of Deuteronomy and elsewhere include the realm of Damascus and in the prophecy of Ezekiel in the idealised division of the land.

Tyre, Sidon and the realm of the Philistines are also included within Israel's territory. Tyre and Sidon were Phoenician cities famous for trade and had long had dealings with Israel over its history, most notably during the reign of Hiram. Jezebel, the wife of Ahab, was a Sidonian princess and many of the materials used for Israel's temples were obtained from Tyre and Sidon.

Tyre is also mentioned in the prophecy of Amos chapter 1 verses 9 to 10. Thus says the Lord After it was conquered by Alexander the Great, Tyre would indeed be destroyed by fire.

Tyre and Sidon, which had become very rich by their trading, prided themselves upon their wealth and also their security.

Tyre seemed impregnable as a city, an island fortress defended by its breakwater. It had withstood lengthy sieges in the past, lasting many years. Playing upon the word for Tyre, Saul, the Lord speaks about Tyre building herself a rampart, a matzah.

However there is an irony here as the word matzah is also the word for siege. Tyre was successfully overthrown by Alexander in 332 BC. While he had originally tried to blockade the city and capture it using more conventional means, he ended up having to build a causeway to the city and then breached its walls.

In addition to Tyre's pride in its security, it took pride in its wealth. It had heaped up silver like dust and fine gold like the mud of the streets. There is again an irony here.

Silver and gold are plentiful but they're plentiful like the dust and mud of the streets, which are trampled and end up proving worthless. Ezekiel chapter 28 verses 2 to 5 also speak of these traits of Tyre, particularly its pride in its wealth and its wisdom and the way that those things would be brought to nothing. Son of man, say to the prince of Tyre, thus says the Lord God, because your heart is proud and you have said, I am a God.

I sit in the seat of the gods in the heart of the seas, yet you are but a man and no God, though you make your heart like the heart of a God. You are indeed wiser than Daniel. No secret is hidden from you.

By your wisdom and your understanding, you have made wealth for yourself and have gathered gold and silver into your treasuries. By your great wisdom in your trade, you have increased your wealth and your heart has become proud in your wealth. Tyre's wealth and strength would end up coming to nothing.

With the coming of Alexander the Great, it would be entirely overthrown. Given the power and wealth of Tyre, its defeat would terrify and dismay the Philistines, with whom they were often associated. The Philistines do not seem to have been a great force at this point in history.

Their significance here is probably on account of their lengthy historical conflicts with Israel, rather than on account of their strength at that moment in time. As in Amos chapter 1 verses 6 to 8, there's no reference to Gath here, which appears to have been removed from the list of the major cities of the Philistines sometime previously. After his defeat of Tyre in 332 BC, Alexander had gone down to Gaza, taking that city with the same siege engines with which he had taken Tyre.

Taking the city, he had put the men to the sword, taken the women and the children as slaves, and dragged the eunuch who had commanded the city and refused to kneel to

him around the city behind a chariot while still alive. Gaza was clearly justified in being dismayed by the news from Tyre. The consequence of the conquest of Philistia is the humbling of its pride, the cutting off of its abominations, and the repopulation of its territories.

The Jebusites had formally controlled the territory of Jerusalem, and many of them seemed to have been assimilated into the nation of Israel over time. Ornan the Jebusite, for instance, sold the land that became the place for the temple. Despite the judgment falling upon them, their loss of nationhood, and their humbling as a people, there is a blessing held out for the Philistines, the prospect of assimilating into the people of Israel that surround them.

Those that remain can also become a remnant for God. They can be like a clan or extended family within the nation of Judah. As this power under his control moves from the north to the south, the Lord will protect his people and his house.

Even in the midst of Alexander's sanguinary invasion, which devastated surrounding powers, they would be spared. We don't know exactly how and why Jerusalem was spared, but there is a fascinating passage at the end of book 11 of Josephus' Antiquities of the Jews, within which he relates the events that followed the defeat of Gaza. Jadaa, the high priest at the time, had heard news of Alexander's victory, and was unsurprisingly greatly dismayed.

He and the rest of the people sacrificed to the Lord and sought his help. He then received a dream in which he was told that he should open the gates of the city, prepare it for a celebration, get the people to wear white garments, and the priest to dress in their clothes of office. He should not be afraid.

The Lord would protect them. While Alexander and the men following him had originally intended to plunder and destroy the city, when Alexander saw Jadaa and the procession that was coming out to meet him, his mind was quite changed. Josephus writes, For Alexander, when he saw the multitude at a distance, in white garments, while the priest stood clothed with fine linen, and the high priest in purple and scarlet clothing, with his mitre on his head, having the golden plate whereon the name of God was engraved, he approached by himself and adored that name, and first saluted the high priest.

The Jews also did all together with one voice salute Alexander, and encompass him about. Whereupon the kings of Syria and the rest were surprised at what Alexander had done, and supposed him disordered in his mind. However, Parmenio alone went up to him, and asked him how it came to pass that, when all others adored him, he should adore the high priest of the Jews.

To whom he replied, I did not adore him, but that God who hath honoured him with his high priesthood. For I saw this very person in a dream, in this very habit, when I was at

Dias in Macedonia, who, when I was considering with myself how I might obtain the dominion of Asia, exhorted me to make no delay, but boldly to press over the sea thither, for that he would conduct my army, and would give me the dominion over the Persians. Whence it is that, having seen no other in that habit, and now seeing this person in it, and remembering that vision, and the exhortation which I had in my dream, I believe that I bring this army under the divine conduct, and shall therewith conquer Darius, and destroy the power of the Persians, and that all things will succeed according to what is in my own mind.

Josephus goes on to record that the high priest and the other priests showed Alexander the references to him within the book of Daniel. As a result, Alexander granted the Jews special favours within the empire. If this account of Josephus is even partially true, then Alexander's campaign very neatly fits the initial things foretold within this chapter.

Verses 9-10 are commonly related to Christ as they refer to the triumphal entry within the book of Matthew and elsewhere. However, in the more immediate context, they may refer primarily to the figure of Alexander the Great. According to Josephus' account, Alexander the Great enjoyed a peaceful, triumphal entry into the city of Jerusalem, coming not with the violence of warhorse and chariot, as he had at Tyre and Gaza, but in peace and with celebrations, as a welcome deliverer.

The description of the king that is coming might also recall Genesis chapter 49 verses 10-11 and the blessing upon Judah. The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him, and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples, binding his foal to the vine, and his donkey's colt to the choice vine. He has washed his garments in wine, and his vesture in the blood of grapes.

There is also here an allusion to Messianic Psalm 72 verse 8. May he have dominion from sea to sea, and from the river to the ends of the earth. This would very naturally be fulfilled in the figure of Alexander. However, it looks forward to a figure that's even greater than Alexander.

Alexander is a world emperor. We have an even greater world emperor, of course, in the figure of Christ. As Christ enters into Jerusalem in his triumphal entry, he is having an even fuller fulfillment of the prophecy of Zachariah.

He may not be the immediate and initial referent of the prophecy, but he is the one in whom it finds its fuller realization. The book of Daniel prophesies into the intertestamental period, particularly in chapter 11, concerning the events that will happen following the defeat of the empire of Persia. The period in question is described with symbolic language.

As for you also, because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit. This would strongly evoke the memory of the figure of Joseph

in Genesis chapter 37 verse 24. And they took him and threw him into a pit.

The pit was empty. There was no water in it. There is a similar waterless pit within the story of Jeremiah, who also ends up being taken down into Egypt against his wishes.

The prophecy of verses 11 to 13 might look forward to a time beyond the conquest of Alexander, to the period when the land was under the control of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, the brutal king of the Greek Seleucid dynasty, who sought forcibly to Hellenize the Jews and to defile their worship. The conflict between the traditional and the Hellenized Jews led to civil war. This civil war escalated when Antiochus entered on the side of the Hellenizers.

The events of this period are described in the books of the Maccabees. The Maccabean revolt was a near miraculous success, leading to Jerusalem being recaptured in 164 BC and the temple rededicated. By the 140s BC, Israel had secured semi-independence of the Seleucids under the rule of the Hasmonean dynasty, who were ethnarchs or kings and also high priests.

The Jews would later achieve independence and the Hasmonean kingdom would expand to include much of the surrounding region. The conflict described in verse 13 seems to refer to a joining together of the faithful people in opposition to some other force. Judah refers to the people of the south and Ephraim the people formerly associated with the Newerland kingdom.

They are joined together like a bow and an arrow. The conflict between the sons of Zion and the sons of Greece might, as Peter Lightheart observes, not primarily be the conflict between the external forces of Greece and the Jews, but rather the conflict between the faithful traditional Jews and the Hellenized Jews, those who had allowed the worship of the Lord to become corrupted. The Lord would empower them in their struggle.

He had bent Judah's bow and made Ephraim his arrow, and his arrows would go forth like lightning. We see a rapid cycle of images in verse 15. Lightheart notes the movement from devouring or eating, presumably referring to the power of the sword, to treading down the slingstones, the weapons of the adversaries.

Treading down slingstones is however a strange image and Lightheart suggests that it is most likely because it transitions from treading down the weapons of the adversaries to an image of treading out grapes in a harvest. Elsewhere in the scripture the image of treading out grapes is used for victory in battle and this victorious wine pressing leads to the Jews drinking and roaring as if drunk with wine. They become full like a bowl, which might be an image of wine but also an image of blood and it is such a transition from an image of wine to an image of blood that seemed to inform the final image of this verse.

Drench like the corners of the altar. The import then is that this would serve as a sort of

purification of the land. The corners or the horns of the altar represent all the extremities of the land.

Those would all be sacrificially cleansed, sacrificially cleansed through victory in battle. The Lord's hand would be demonstrated in all of this. He would save his people as his own flock, setting them apart as his special possession, like precious stones or jewels in a crown.

This would lead to joy and celebration in the goodness of the Lord and the flourishing of the people. A question to consider, as we reflect upon the original context and meaning of the one entering Jerusalem, how might it help us better to understand the ways in which the Gospel writers are using this prophecy? Matthew chapter 21 verses 1 to 22. Now when they drew near to Jerusalem and came to Bethphage, to the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, Go into the village in front of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her.

Untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, you shall say, The Lord needs them, and he will send them at once. This took place to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet, saying, Say to the daughter of Zion, Behold, your king is coming to you, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.

The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them. They brought the donkey and the colt, and put on them their cloaks, and he sat on them. Most of the crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road.

And the crowds that went before him and that followed him were shouting, Hosanna to the son of David, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, Hosanna in the highest. When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up, saying, Who is this? And the crowd said, This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth of Galilee. And Jesus entered the temple, and drove out all who sold and bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the pigeons.

He said to them, It is written, My house shall be called a house of prayer, but you make it a den of robbers. And the blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he healed them. But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that he did, and the children crying out in the temple, Hosanna to the son of David, they were indignant, 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 infants and nursing babes do you have prepared praise? And leaving them, he went out of the city to Bethany, and lodged there.

In the morning, as he was returning to the city, he became hungry, and seeing a fig tree by the wayside, he went to it, and found nothing on it but only leaves. And he said to it, May no fruit ever come from you again. And the fig tree withered at once.

When the disciples saw it, they marveled, saying, How did the fig tree wither at once? And Jesus answered them, Truly I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, Be taken up and thrown into the sea, it will happen. And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith. As Jesus draws near to Jerusalem in Matthew chapter 21, he arrives at the Mount of Olives at Bethphage and sends two of his disciples ahead of them to find a donkey and a colt, and to untie them and bring them to him.

For such a lowly beast of burden, it's interesting how significant a role the donkey plays in the history of Israel's kingdom. It seldom is the centre of the story, but it does play a common role within the story of the kingdom at pivotal historical moments in its establishment and in prophecies concerning it. At times it serves to reveal or to highlight identities and destinies of key protagonists, and at other points it plays a part in setting in motion key events.

The story of the kingdom begins with Saul searching for the donkeys of his father. In Genesis chapter 49 verses 10 to 11, Jacob prophesies concerning the tribe of Judah, speaking about binding the foal to his vine, the donkey's colt to the choice vine, connecting the tribe of Judah with the donkey from the very beginning of its story. As already mentioned, the story of Saul focuses upon a quest for donkeys, and he is told as one of the first signs of the kingdom that the donkeys have been found.

And the whole episode concerning Saul ends with a conversation with his uncle about the lost donkeys in 1st Samuel chapter 10 verse 14 to 16. And there's an association with donkeys and mules and rule and kingship. We first see this in Genesis chapter 49.

It's also seen in the book of Judges, Judges chapter 5 verse 10, verse 4 of chapter 10, and verse 14 of chapter 12. When David is sent to Saul by Jesse, he is sent with a donkey and with other signs associated with the kingdom, the signs that Saul himself was given in chapter 10. In 1st Samuel chapter 16 verses 1 and 2, David escapes from Jerusalem after his son Absalom's coup, and Zeba brings two donkeys for the king's household to ride upon.

And there's an ironic twist as Absalom the pretender ends up hung from a terebinth tree by his long hair when his mule goes beneath it. The association between Davidic rulers and donkeys or mules is seen most markedly in 1st Kings chapter 1 verses 28 to 40, and in that chapter the fraught situation of royal succession and who's going to take David's throne when he dies is resolved in large part as Solomon is distinguished as the true heir to the throne through a triumphal entry into Jerusalem on King David's own mule. So the donkey or the mule or the king's steed is associated with peaceful rule, while the horse is an animal of war.

There's a different sort of triumphal entry that we see in the case of Jehu, who's secretly anointed by Elisha and goes over a carpet of people's garments that they have stretched

out before him in 2nd Kings chapter 9 verses 1 to 13. Jehu, however, is not a meek ruler riding on a donkey. He's a furious and bloody charioteer and horseman.

He kills Joram of Israel and Ahaziah of Judah. He tramples Jezebel under his horse's feet as he enters Jezreel and then in chapter 10 verses 18 to 28 he cleanses the Temple of Baal in the most bloody of manners. When the prophet Zechariah foretells the coming of a new king to restore the people's fortunes, he's identified by his riding of a colt, the foal of a donkey, and the character of his rule is distinguished from that of the warmongering regents with their royal charges.

In Zechariah chapter 9 verses 9 to 10, This is a powerful prophecy and it's a prophecy whose words ring within this resonance chamber of all these references to the king and his donkeys and the way in which rule is demonstrated through horses, donkeys, and mules and other symbolic beasts. This recalls the blessing of Jacob over his son Judah and some of the most glorious and tragic episodes in Israel's history. The coming king is the true bearer of Judah's scepter.

He's the one who will establish the kingdom. He's greater than Saul who sought for the donkeys and he's the true son of David. He will realise the unfulfilled promise of Solomon who fell short of his name in calling to be the prince of peace.

His coming will not be like that of the violent Jehu. The chariot and the horse and the conflicts to which they belong will be cut off and the nations will be granted a gentle word of peace. And so Christ comes into the city in a way that's deeply symbolic.

This is an action that's carefully considered. Jesus is engaging in a symbolic action that displays kingship but kingship of a very particular type. And he comes into the city and goes to the temple.

His action in the temple interrupts the affairs of the temple. He drives people out. He overturns tables.

And there are lots of allusions to scripture in these sections. He speaks about the way in which a house of prayer has been made into a den of thieves, a den of robbers. And what does he mean by this? A robber's den is a place to retreat for brigands to protect themselves from the consequences of their violence.

It's a place of safety and security and refuge for brigands. And Jesus is teaching that for the Jews of his day the temple has become just that. It's become a place to claim refuge from the consequences of their sins.

It's like the people of Jeremiah's day. The temple, the temple, the temple of the Lord are these. They take confidence in the fact that they have this building.

It's a sort of talismanic security against the judgment of God. And yet God is going to

come to the temple. He's going to inspect his temple and he's going to purge it.

The promise of Malachi is going to come to pass. The Lord whom you seek is suddenly going to come to his temple and he's going to purge and test. He's going to come to the threshing floor which is associated with the temple and he's going to clean it and cleanse it.

And Christ comes as foretold by John the Baptist. Now this is a cleansing in preparation for a later judgment. There's a judgment upon the temple that will fall in AD 70 and this prepares for that.

It's supposed to be a house of prayer. It's supposed to be a place of prayer for all nations. That's what it was originally established to be by Solomon.

And now it has failed in that regard. It's actually serving the exact opposite purpose. A place not of holiness but a place to excuse wickedness.

A place to shield people from the consequences of their wickedness. Jesus cleansed the temple and then the blind and the lame come to him in the temple. We've already discussed themes of entry into Jerusalem in conquest and victory and triumph.

Something like the story of Solomon as he's about to be established as king or the story of Jehu as he goes into Jezreel with judgment and Jehu cleanses the temple of Baal and in a very bloody way. Jesus is coming into the temple and he's coming in in a way that maybe reminds us of some other stories and those reminders can be given to us in the way that he treats the blind and the lame. In 2 Samuel chapter 5 David conquers Jerusalem and the king and his men went up to Jerusalem against the Jebusites, the inhabitants of the land, who said to David, you will not come in here but the blind and the lame will ward you off, thinking David cannot come in here.

Nevertheless David took the stronghold of Zion, that is the city of David. And David said on that day, whoever would strike the Jebusites, let him get up the water shaft to attack the lame and the blind who are hated by David's soul. Therefore it is said the blind and the lame shall not come into the house.

The taunt of the Jebusites concerning the blind and the lame is a crucial part of the story of David's original conquest of Jerusalem. The fact that Jesus enters in triumph into Jerusalem and then enters into the house, the temple itself, and there he heals the blind and the lame who come to him, suggests that he's playing out this story of David once more but in a way that involves ironic reversals and fulfillments. As we noted earlier in 2 Samuel 16 verse 1, Ziba brings two donkeys to David for himself and his household.

He brings the two donkeys to David in a similar location as the two disciples find them. In riding in on two donkeys then, Jesus is symbolically reversing the departure of David from Jerusalem. As the greater son of he is re-entering Jerusalem.

You can also see it as a reversal of God's movement out of Jerusalem in Ezekiel chapter 8 to 11. Once again, children epitomise the true behaviour and character of the kingdom. They greet Jesus with hosannas and they express the joy and the delight that should be characteristic of the kingdom, the welcome that they give to Christ.

The judgement that follows this upon the fig tree is a symbolic judgement upon the temple and upon Jerusalem. In Mark's account it frames Jesus' action within the temple. The fig tree represents Israel and its leaders and their failure to produce fruit.

And the reference to the mountain should also be considered in this context. It's not any old mountain that Jesus is referring to. It's the mountain that is exactly opposite.

This mountain, the mount of the temple, that that is going to be removed and thrown into the sea. It's going to be part of this new order. The old mountains are going to be removed and put out of place and the new world is going to be established.

No longer will they worship upon that mountain or upon some mountain up in Samaria. But God's worship will occur all over the world. That mountain of the temple will be cast into the sea, the sea of the Gentiles, and not one stone of its temple will be left upon another.

A question to consider. How might the laws for a leprous house in the book of Leviticus help us to understand Jesus' action within the temple?