



Principles, Preaching and Problems

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An ass and a colt

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“. . . unto [Shiloh] shall the gathering of the people be. Binding his foal unto the vine, and his ass's colt unto the choice vine . . .” (Gen. 49:10,11).

The ass is most often remembered for one characteristic peculiar to its species, its stubborn nature. It loves freedom and hates restraint (Jer. 2:24). It has many other characteristics, however, which on examination can be helpful and instructive, and it does have a symbolic significance that we shall also consider.

THE ASS HAS a constitution formed for dry rugged regions such as a rocky wilderness. It prefers to eat dry, aromatic, bitter and prickly herbs rather than the most succulent grass. It is fond of rolling in the dry dust, and suffers little from thirst and heat, consequently drinking seldom and in small quantities. It is silent when its wants are satisfied (Job 6:5). It has a preference for lone, wild places (Isa. 32:14), and as a solitary animal chooses the high ground (Hos. 8:9; Jer. 14:6). All these are characteristics of some significance, especially when we come to consider the way the ass is singled out by a special law under the Mosaic constitution.

The Mosaic Law

The firstborn of unclean beasts could be dedicated to the Lord, or they could be redeemed by adding the fifth part of their total value (Lev. 27:11-13). The ass was an exception to this law, and two alternative actions were prescribed, as described in Exodus 13:13. The firstling of an ass could be redeemed by a lamb, otherwise its neck was to be broken, so suffering a bloodless death. This latter action indicated the inability of the ass to redeem itself. By the very fact that the ass was covered by this special law there was to Israel, and thereby to us also, a tremendous significance to this animal.

The context in Exodus 13 is that of the redemption of the firstborn, including man. The record continues by saying that if a son asks his father, “What is this?”, the father is to reply to the effect that the Lord redeemed Israel from Egypt, and to continue: “therefore I sacrifice to the LORD all that openeth the matrix, being males; but all the firstborn of my children I redeem” (vv. 14,15). He makes no mention of the ass in this reply. Why? Surely this must be due to the fact that the firstborn son and the firstling ass represent the same thing, that is, the redemption of the firstborn nation. If this is the case then the ass is a Divinely revealed symbol of the nation of Israel.¹

A symbol of the nation

We can find support in other parts of Scripture for the idea that the ass was a symbol of the nation. In Jeremiah 2:24 Israel is described as “a wild ass used to the wilderness, that snuffeth up the wind at her pleasure; in her occasion who can turn her away?” (Jer. 2:24). Hosea 8:9 says of Israel: “they are gone up to Assyria, a wild ass alone by himself”.

Note how in both these references Israel is referred to as a *wild* ass, thus indicating her waywardness and stubbornness. This truth is especially highlighted on consideration of the nation's spiritual climate during which these two prophets spoke. The apostasy and corruption in Judah and Israel had reached appalling depths, with a total refusal to heed the word of the Lord sent through the prophets. The nation had become

1. The word translated ‘ass’ in Exodus 13:13 is the Hebrew word *chamor*, so called from its ruddy colour (Young), perhaps symbolic of the sinful state of the nation before redemption.

sensual, following their own natural lusts like the wild ass. We also have reference to Israel as “a stiffnecked people” (Deut. 9:6).

Jacob’s prophecy

It is not only Israel that is represented in symbol by the ass in Scripture. The reference at the top of this article is part of what Jacob said when he called his sons to him and revealed “that which shall befall you in the last days” (Gen. 49:1). The words addressed to Judah were of prophetic import for the Gentiles as well as the Jews. Not only was an ass involved, but also the ass’s colt.

The meaning of this is seen in the actions of our Lord when he entered into Jerusalem shortly before his death. He instructed his disciples to go and obtain both an ass and its colt from a specific place, and said, “bring *them* unto me” (Mt. 21:2). Matthew tells us that this is in fulfilment of a prophecy recorded in Zechariah 9:9, where we read: “behold, thy King cometh unto thee: he is just, and having salvation; lowly, and riding upon an ass, *and* upon a colt the foal of an ass”. The riding upon an ass is a symbol of authority: “Speak, ye that ride on white asses, ye that sit in judgment” (Judg. 5:10; cf. 10:4; 12:14).

So, when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on the ass, he was illustrating that he was the one with authority, the one who would exercise judgement, that he was the King of Israel, the Messiah of God. The ass (representing Israel) was redeemed by a lamb (Jesus Christ himself), so fulfilling Exodus 13:13. The King of Israel redeems his nation by his own sacrifice. But more than one animal was present; besides the ass there was also the colt. The words of Matthew are quite specific; in the original Greek it states: “. . . and he sat on *them*” (21:7). Christ would have to do this for the words of Zechariah’s prophecy and the blessing of Jacob to be fulfilled.

It is interesting to note that only Matthew’s Gospel mentions that Jesus rode the ass; Mark and Luke mention only the colt. Matthew wrote for the Jews, the other two wrote for Gentiles. If the ass represented Israel then the colt would represent the Gentiles who were to be bound to the choice vine, the commonwealth of Israel. The

events which followed the entry of Christ into Jerusalem, the cursing of the fig tree, the cleansing of the court of the Gentiles (Mk. 11:12-18) and the arrival of the Greeks who said, “Sir, we would see Jesus” (Jno. 12:20,21), seem to emphasise the Gentile aspect of Christ’s work of salvation.²

All one in Christ

The order in which Christ rode the ass and the colt indicates that he is firstly King of Israel and then King of the redeemed Gentiles. The fact that the colt is the foal of an ass is teaching us that the redeemed Gentiles are of the same parentage (by faith) as Israel. In Exodus 13:13 the lamb redeems the “firstling of an ass”, that is, a colt. So here we have a typical prophecy of the inclusion in the commonwealth of Israel of Gentiles through the reconciliation in the Lamb of God.

Israel could either accept redemption in the Lamb (Jesus) or remain stiffnecked and stubborn, preferring the ways of their choosing as of old, and die uncovered by his atoning blood. The stiffnecked, rebellious generation of Christ’s day had its neck broken by the Roman armies within forty years.

The lessons for us are very clear. God promised redemption to the Gentiles from the time when He first formed a people for His Name. Let us not display the characteristics of the ass, seeking our own ways, rolling in the dust of this world and stubbornly refusing to be led by God in His ways. Let us satisfy our appetites and quench our thirst with those things that God provides, for He will give us green pastures and still waters when we subject our wills to Him. If we do this then our necks will not be broken, and by the grace of God we will be part of that glorious hope expressed by Jacob: “unto [Shiloh] shall the gathering of the people be. Binding his foal unto the vine, and his ass’s colt unto the choice vine”.

2. Harry Whittaker, in commenting on Genesis 49:11 in the appendix of *Wrestling Jacob*, presents further evidence for the colt representing the Gentiles.

Israel on the alert

Israel has deployed ground-to-air missiles in the centre of the country as part of her preparedness against a September 11-style attack from the air, Air Force commander Dan Halutz said recently.—*Joan Brooks*