

# Voices: Jesus' triumphal entry rebuked religious nationalism

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Each year, Christians celebrate Palm Sunday, Jesus' so-called "triumphal entry" into Jerusalem. The gospels do depict crowds celebrating triumphantly, but what if Jesus was rebuking his own followers?

What if Jesus did not agree with their hopes for the Messiah? What do Jesus' actions and words really say in [Luke 19:28-44](#), if we have [ears to hear](#)?

## Messianic hopes

Jesus excited his disciples' imagination by taking the route of Joshua toward Jerusalem, crossing the Jordan into Jericho. Then he sent two disciples on a [secret mission](#). Joshua sent the [same number of spies](#) to prepare for the much earlier conquest of Canaan. Maybe they were scouting out Jerusalem's defenses. Instead, they return with a donkey.

Jesus riding a donkey into Jerusalem fulfills [Zechariah 9:9](#). Many Jews believed that prophecy part of a larger prophecy that Messiah would bring peace for the Jews through a war against the nations ([Zechariah 9:13](#)). Their response to Jesus riding a donkey fits this common Jewish hope.

People threw [cloaks](#) down before Jesus' path, just like Jehu's men when [Elisha anointed him](#) to become king of Israel—though there already was a king of Israel. Jehu became a messiah to assassinate King Joram.

People also waved palm branches and threw them down before Jesus, just as Jews did a century earlier during the Maccabean Revolt. Simon

was [greeted by cheering crowds and palm branches](#) after his army liberated Jerusalem from Syrian occupation and cleansed the temple.

Finally, [Matthew, Mark and John](#) tell us the crowds shouted out: “Hosanna! Save us!” The people had nationalistic dreams Jesus would successfully lead a rebellion against the Romans.

Luke makes it clear this is how the Pharisees interpreted these events, since they tell Jesus to quiet his disciples. No doubt, they were eyeing the Roman soldiers standing watch on Jerusalem’s walls, fearing they might become agitated and move to put down this apparent protest movement calling for rebellion.

Instead of quieting his disciples, Jesus replied, “[If they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.](#)”

Perhaps Jesus’ disciples thought he was referencing [Habakkuk 2:10](#), where the stones of the walls would cry out against the injustices they bore witness to within the city. After all, Luke emphasizes the crowd is descending into the Kidron Valley. Across the valley, they could see the massive stones of Jerusalem’s walls.

Then, [Jesus wept](#) as he looked across at Jerusalem. He mourned that the people did not grasp the true meaning of peace. He wept because his people’s desire to defeat the cultural intrusion of Rome through physical force would result in the loss of all the institutions they held dear.

He shed tears because his beloved people loved the power and glory of Jerusalem, the temple and the land of Israel. They hoped Jesus was the strong man they needed to make Israel great once again through a violent expulsion of the Romans.

# Zechariah's full meaning

Jesus had a very different vision for the kingdom and his role as Messiah. Riding a donkey was not a message of conquest. The “triumphal entry” surrounding him was just Satan’s latest temptation to lure Jesus to desire the very power structures he had rejected since the [voice from heaven](#) told him his role as Messiah was to be a suffering servant.

Jesus intentionally acted out Zechariah 9:9, rather than some other messianic prophecy, precisely because of his rejection of Messiah as conquering king.

Jesus riding a donkey was pointing us to reflect on the entire book of Zechariah. [Zechariah 4](#) speaks of two trees pouring out oil into a single lampstand. They are called two Messiahs—king and priest.

[Zechariah 6](#) orders a crown to be placed on the chief priest, who will rule from his throne and bring “harmony between the two.” Zechariah thus shifts the focus from the king to the priest.

Jesus proclaimed himself to be a priest-king. He would serve his people’s spiritual needs, rather than rule with might to enforce his people’s desire for power and prestige.

John understood Jesus to be priest-king. John has Jesus quote [Zechariah 6:13](#) about rebuilding the temple as justification for cleansing the temple ([John 2:19](#)). He has Pilate quote [Zechariah 6:12](#) —“Here is the man”—as he presents Jesus before the crowd in purple robe and crown of thorns ([John 19:7](#)).



Graveyard at the Mount of Olives (Photo by J.M. Givens Jr. Used by permission).

### **The cry from the stones**

Not only was the donkey Jesus' rebuke of violent revolution, but his statement that the stones would cry out was not about the stones of Jerusalem's walls. As noted before, Luke emphasizes the crowd was [going down](#) the Mount of Olives into the Kidron Valley.

This area, both then and now, was a vast Jewish graveyard. There were stones everywhere, in front of tombs as well as atop crypts.

The stones themselves would not be crying out: "Hosanna! Save us!" Rather, it would be the dead behind those stones shouting out for Jesus to remember them when he came into his kingdom.

In Zechariah, there is a promise from God attached to the one who rides the donkey: "Because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will free your

prisoners from the waterless pit” ([Zechariah 9:11](#)).

Jesus’ decision to be a priest-king and to sacrifice his life would result in the salvation of those in the grave—the waterless pit—as well as those of us yet to die.

This Prophet like Moses would not liberate the people from slavery to an occupying force. His exodus would lead people out of the grave. This Messiah had not come to defeat the Romans. He would destroy the common enemy of all people—death itself.

Jesus wept because he knew many there that day rejoicing in his enactment of a messianic claim ultimately would reject his servant-priest-king conception of what it meant to be Messiah. Instead, they would follow after various revolutionaries who rose up before and after him, until the Romans eventually had enough and destroyed Jerusalem and the temple in A.D. 70.

As with the “triumphal entry,” Jesus’ whole life was a repudiation of power politics and cultural wars. Jesus foresaw the exaltation of religious nationalism as the destruction of his people ... and he wept. When will American Christians put off the power dynamics of Cain and put on the servant righteousness of Jesus the Messiah?

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