



AMY-JILL  
LEVINE

ENTERING  
THE PASSION  
*of* JESUS

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE to HOLY WEEK





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## **Chapter 1**

# Jerusalem: Risking Reputation





## Chapter 1

# JERUSALEM: RISKING REPUTATION

*When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, “Go into the village ahead 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, just say this, ‘The Lord needs them.’ And he will send them immediately.” This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,*

*“Tell the daughter of Zion,  
Look, your king is coming to you,  
humble, and mounted on a donkey,  
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”*

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*The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,*

*“Hosanna to the Son of David!*

*Blessed is the one who comes in the name  
of the Lord!*

*Hosanna in the highest heaven!”*

*When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?” The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”*

*Matthew 21:1-11*

The Gospels give us four versions of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem: Matthew 21:1-11; Mark 11:1-11; Luke 19:28-44; and John 12:12-19. Each has a different emphasis; each has specific details that contribute to the greater whole. No one Gospel can tell the full story, and each should be savored for the story it tells. In this chapter, we concentrate on Matthew’s version, remarking throughout on the distinctive elements in the other versions. Each Gospel deserves its own full treatment, so ideally you will read the other accounts on your own, closely, to compare what message each seeks to convey.

In the story of Jesus’ triumphal entry, there are prophecies and characters from the Scriptures of Israel—what the church calls the “Old Testament” and what Jews call the “Tanakh”

(an acronym for Torah [Instruction], Nevi'im [Prophets], and Ketuvim [Writings])—that provide the color and explanation for what's going on—the donkey and the colt, the humble savior, the cries of “Hosanna!,” even the palms. For Jesus, the risk of riding into Jerusalem in a victory parade is very real. Pontius Pilate is also making an appearance as he comes, with his entourage, into Jerusalem to tell the Jewish people celebrating the Passover, the “Feast of Freedom” from slavery and oppression, that Rome is in charge. And Jesus’ entry calls attention to himself in a major way. Tensions are running high, as are expectations: of liberation, of freedom, of autonomy. As Jesus enters into town on a donkey with the crowd crying out for him, the Passion begins.



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running high, as are expectations: of liberation, of freedom, of autonomy. As Jesus enters into town on a donkey with the crowd crying out for him, the Passion begins.

The triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, celebrated on Palm Sunday, is the start of Passion Week. It also begins a story of tragedy and triumph that should inspire, provoke, and challenge. We who are familiar with the New Testament—or who have seen one of the numerous “Jesus” movies popular during Lent—know how the story goes: in less than a week after this grand entry parade, the crowds are calling for Jesus’ death.

We know what will happen, for Jesus had already three times told his followers of his fate. He has taught them “that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed,



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and after three days rise again.” He wasn’t teaching in parables or using metaphors. Mark insists, “He said all this quite openly” (Mark 8:31-32a).

We also know that this story, this Triumphal Entry, will have a happy ending. Jesus had several times announced to his disciples that the cross was not the end of the story, that betrayal can be overcome, that justice does prevail, and that sacrifice can lead to redemption. He proclaims resurrection, something in which most Jews believed and which some Jews to this day, including in my own Orthodox synagogue, still proclaim. According to Jewish liturgy, God is to be praised for “giving life to the dead.”

To be sure, good stories deserve repeating, and good lessons warrant reiteration. And yet we can do more. Let’s start with Matthew’s story, a story that should not only inspire, it should surprise; it should not only challenge, it should also delight. It is a good story in which the narrative art of the Gospel writer perfectly matches the profound theology that the story seeks to convey.

## **The Meek King**

Let’s watch again: We’re on the outskirts of Jerusalem, the city that was holy then as it is holy now to the Jewish community. It is the capital of Judea, and it is the site of the Temple to which Jews would already be coming as pilgrims at Passover. The city would swell with Jews celebrating the Feast of Freedom, the end of slavery, the exodus from Egypt, the time of redemption. Thousands upon thousands would come to Jerusalem—from Athens and Egypt, Babylon and Rome, Damascus, and, of course, Galilee.

But then something quite strange happens.

Jesus tells two of his followers: “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with

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her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately" (Matthew 21:2-3).

Imagine this in our context: A popular leader sends two members of his entourage from, say, a respectable suburb into the downtown area of a big city, with the instructions, "You will find a Lexus sedan, and next to it a sports car—bring them to me. And if anyone asks, 'Hey, what are you doing with those cars?,' just say, 'The Lord needs them.' That'll be fine." Not likely! The next call will not be for spiritual redemption; it will be to 911 to report two stolen cars.

Matthew could be saying that Jesus had supernatural powers that not only allowed him to know where a donkey and colt could be found but also granted him the charisma such that his disciples could simply take what they wanted. I find it more likely that Jesus had friends in the area—especially if the colt is located in or near Bethany, two miles from Jerusalem, where his friends Mary, Martha, and Lazarus live.

The Gospel of John tells us that Jesus had been to Jerusalem several times. Right after the sign of turning water into wine at the wedding in Cana, "the Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem" (John 2:13). He surely found followers there, for "when he was in Jerusalem during the Passover festival, many believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing" (John 2:23). In John 5:1, again we read, "There was a festival of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem." John does not name what festival this is, but the most likely feast here would be what Jews call "Shavuot," the "Feast of Weeks"; the holiday that celebrates the giving of the Torah to Moses on Mount Sinai, is known in Greek as "Pentecost." For the church, it is at Pentecost when, according to Acts 2, the Holy Spirit descends

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on the apostles. For Jews, Shavuot marks the time, fifty days after the exodus from Egypt, when Moses received the Torah at Mount Sinai and gave it to the people Israel. In John 10:22, we are told that Jesus again went up to Jerusalem for the “festival of the Dedication.” That title refers to the holiday of Hanukkah, when the Jewish people regained their independence from the Syrian-Greeks who in the second century BCE had attempted to prevent them from following their own religious beliefs and practices. (Interestingly, the first recording of this event is in the books of 1 and 2 Maccabees, which are part of the canon of some Christian groups. Christians kept the history; Jews have the holiday.) Jesus is familiar with Jerusalem, and the people in the city know him, or at least they think they do.

Let’s stop to consider the geographical symbolism that begins the Passion narrative. Jerusalem is the Holy City, but it is also occupied by the Romans. When we enter into a place where we know we oppose the local leaders, what do we do? What do we say? How do we plan ahead?

Jesus most likely planned this entry; the symbolism is no less significant even if it had been carefully staged. If one is going to confront any system that prevents human wholeness—be it poverty, sickness, colonialism, or lack of compassion—it helps to have a plan.

Jesus’ plans extended beyond a particular concern for transportation. According to Matthew, the obtaining of the donkey “took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, “Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey” (Matthew 21:4-5).\*

Again, we should stop and savor what Matthew is doing.

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\* The citation is a combination of Zechariah 9:9 and Isaiah 62:11.

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When a Gospel text cites the Scriptures of Israel—and Matthew does this frequently—our readings are enhanced when we look at the full context of those citations. Zechariah 9:9 is surrounded by verses that confirm and enrich the single verse. In Zechariah 9:11, the prophet proclaims, “because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit.” Thus, Matthew is cluing us in: not only is the time of redemption coming, it is coming with the assurance that God is faithful to the covenants. The Triumphal Entry anticipates the Last Supper.

If we look at Zechariah’s full prophecy, we see even more relevant material. Zechariah 9:9, which has six lines, also proclaims, “Lo, your king comes to you; / triumphant and victorious is he.” The word the NRSV translates as “triumphant” really means, in Hebrew, “righteous.” The focus for Zechariah, and for Jesus, is not on militaristic conquering, but on the power of justice.

We should also pay attention to the nuances of the part of the verse Matthew records. When Zechariah, and then Matthew, describes the coming king as “humble,” the term does not mean “meek” or “gentle.” The Hebrew has the connotation of being “poor” or “afflicted.” This king does not enter with the trappings of royalty or a military parade or a twenty-one-gun salute. That is not the type of rule he teaches. The Greek term that the NRSV translates as “meek” refers to someone in authority who does not lord it over others. Followers of Jesus may be familiar with Psalm 37:11, “But the meek shall inherit the earth; and shall delight themselves in the abundance of peace” (KJV). This is the verse to which Jesus alludes in the Beatitudes that open the Sermon on the Mount: “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth” (Matthew 5:5).

Inheriting the earth, for the psalm and for the Gospel, requires being humble, not in the sense of lowly, but in the sense of being able to listen to others, to share resources, to prioritize community



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for the psalm and for the Gospel, requires being humble, not in the sense of lowly, but in the sense of being able to listen to others, to share resources, to prioritize community rather than authority, to serve rather than to be served.

rather than authority, to serve rather than to be served. All that underlies the words from Zechariah, and Matthew's first-century Jewish audience would have known it.

According to the NRSV's translation of Zechariah 9:9, this entering king is "victorious." Again, the Hebrew offers a different nuance. The Hebrew term translated "victorious" literally means "saved." It comes from the same root as the term "hosanna" and the names Hosea, Joshua, and, yes, Jesus. The Greek of this term really means "savior." We

find the same Hebrew word, together with a reference to a king, in Psalm 33:16, which reads, "A king is not saved by his great army; a warrior is not delivered by his great strength."

Finally, Matthew's citation also alludes to Isaiah 62:11, "Say to daughter Zion..." The prophet continues: "See, your salvation comes" and then describes the people whom daughter Zion represents: "They shall be called, 'The Holy People, The Redeemed of the LORD'" (Isaiah 62:12a).

Zechariah speaks of a king who does not lord it over others, but who takes his place with those who are suffering. Zechariah

## *In every good story, there is history and there is risk*

In *Entering the Passion of Jesus: A Beginner's Guide to Holy Week*, author, professor, and biblical scholar Amy-Jill Levine delves into the history and literature surrounding the last days of Jesus' life. Levine sets the narrative in historical context and analyzes the risks and motives of the story's characters.

From Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem to his prayerful agony in Gethsemane, Levine brings forward aspects and details that open doors for beginners as well as seasoned readers of the Bible. She shows how the text raises ethical and spiritual questions for the reader, and how we all face risk in our Christian experience.

*Entering the Passion of Jesus* provides a rich and challenging learning experience for small groups and individual readers alike.

*Grounded in the rich and compelling scholarship we have come to expect from her, Amy-Jill Levine's Entering the Passion of Jesus will surprise many and inform all who walk through Holy Week with her.*

—**Rev. Dr. William Brosend**, School of Theology, the University of the South

*This exploration of the passion narratives is not only greatly informative but also deeply comforting and challenging as Levine shows the risks Jesus asks us to take in order to love as he did.*

—**Barbara Reid**, OP, Professor of New Testament Studies, Catholic Theological Union

*This inspirational book is a rare combination of scholarly wisdom and timely interpretation. Professor Levine paints a compelling picture of Jesus who, through commitment to a God of love, justice, and peace, risks compassionate action in spite of its dangers. Strongly recommended for those seeking the deeper meaning of the Passion.*

—**John S. McClure**, Charles G. Finney Professor of Preaching and Worship, Vanderbilt Divinity School

Also Available: DVD, Leader Guide



**AMY-JILL LEVINE** is University Professor of New Testament and Jewish Studies and Mary Jane Werthan Professor of Jewish Studies at Vanderbilt Divinity School and College of Arts and Science. An internationally renowned scholar and teacher, she is the author of numerous books including *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* and *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*. She is also the co-editor of the *Jewish Annotated New Testament*. Professor Levine has done more than 300 programs for churches, clergy groups, and seminaries.

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