

## On the Interpretation of Zechariah 9:9

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This essay takes a fresh look at a famous passage: Zechariah 9:9. Here is the text and a translation:

3:3	הָרִיעִי בֵּת יְרוּשָׁלַם	גִּילִי מְאֹד בֵּת-צִיּוֹן
(2:2):3	צַדִּיק וְנוֹשֵׁעַ הוּא	הִנֵּה מֶלֶכְךָ יָבוֹא לְךָ
3:2	וְעַל-עֵיִר בְּוֶ-אֲתָנּוֹת:	עָנִי וְרַכֵּב עַל-חֲמֹר

Throb with abandon, fair Zion!  
Let out a shout, fair Jerusalem!  
Behold your king,  
He will come to you;  
He is just and victorious;  
Lowly, mounted on an ass,  
On a donkey, a foal of she-asses.

The text is a three line unit with a 1:(1:1) structure. The first line introduces the following two. The middle line has three parts, or versets, with the major caesura coming between the second and third versets. The first and last lines each have two parts. Internal semantic, syntactic, and morphological parallelisms characterize the opening and closing couplets. The lack of strict parallelisms across the middle, tripartite line serves to set off and highlight its content. The rhetorical peak of the unit is constituted by the central line.

Each verset of the whole is unfailingly made up of two to three stress units. Totals are indicated in the left margin opposite the Hebrew text. The pattern constitutes the meter of the unit. It is identical to that found elsewhere in ancient Hebrew verse.

The above translation pays no heed to the history of the text's interpretation. It differs from other translations for that reason. Claims to the contrary notwithstanding, modern translations of the Hebrew Bible often calque ancient translations rather than directly translate the Hebrew text.

Translators are sometimes unaware of the degree to which their work is determined by tradition. To be sure, there is much to be said for embedding the work of translation within tradition. It situates the text within a stream of interpretation that has flowed without ceasing for more than two millennia.

There is also something to be said for the attempt to recover the sense the text had at the beginning of the process. That sense is of historical interest.

The task of reconstructing the sense the text had “once upon a time” may also be understood as an act of devotion. The text as it would have been understood *then*, not the text as it has come to be understood, is brought to life again. The text of old, we may expect, is yet able to speak through the words it contains. Words of long ago are still able to pose a danger to the status quo, and enhance our lives.

The earliest of all translations of the Hebrew Bible is the Old Greek translation, traditionally referred to as the Septuagint or LXX. A product of Second Temple Judaism, it reflects pre-Christian exegetical trends. LXX Zechariah 9:9 will have a familiar ring to a majority of Bible readers today. For example, a representative of the King James tradition of Bible translation, the English Standard version (ESV), differs little from it:

Χαῖρε σφόδρα, θύγατερ Σιων ·  
 κήρυσσε, θύγατερ Ιερουσαλημ ·  
 ἰδοὺ ὁ βασιλεὺς σου ἔρχεται σοι,  
 δίκαιος καὶ σώζων αὐτός,  
 πραῦς καὶ ἐπιβεβηκὼς ἐπὶ ὑποζύγιον  
 καὶ πῶλον νέον.

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!  
 Proclaim, O daughter of Jerusalem!

Behold, your King comes to you;  
 Just and saving is he;  
 Gentle and mounted on a beast of burden  
 And a young colt.

[LXX]

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!  
 Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem!

Behold, your king is coming to you;  
 Righteous and having salvation is he,  
 Humble and mounted on a donkey,  
 On a colt, the foal of a donkey.

[ESV]

Here and there ESV hews closer to the Hebrew than LXX does. By and large, however, it sticks with an understanding of the text in continuity with

that reflected in the LXX as it came to be parsed in the Christian tradition. A few notes on the above translations may prove helpful.

(1) ‘Rejoice’ is a *generalizing* translation of a verb in Hebrew (גִּיל) which has a concrete meaning along the lines of ‘throb,’ ‘tremble,’ and ‘quake.’ The meaning is probable in Psalm 2:11 and Hos 10:5, as already noted in BDB, and fits all other occurrences as well. It is difficult to be sure about how live the concrete meaning is in a case like Zech 9:9. As is true of “thrill” in English, the concrete meaning of גִּיל is not activated in all usage of it. Generalizing translation technique allows a text that might otherwise seem awkward or inappropriate to more fluently address an audience at one or more removes from the culture or situation presupposed in the original. It also drains the original of its expressive force.

(2) A tendency to replace concrete with abstract language also manifests itself in LXX’s translation of Hebrew ‘let out a shout’ (הִרְיֵעַי) with ‘proclaim.’ ISV’s ‘cry out’ moves in the same direction.

(3) ‘Daughter Zion/Jerusalem’ contains a syntagmeme, ‘daughter’ (בַּת־) followed by the name of a city or country, which expresses endearment and carries, it would seem, a connotation of feminine beauty. Personified as a young woman, the city is invited to celebrate the arrival of her king with pulsating movement and shouts.

The translation ‘Daughter of Zion/Jerusalem’ is misleading. It is a formal equivalent, not a functional equivalent. Following certain words (*land* of Egypt, *city* of London), appositional genitives are possible in English, but not following *daughter*. ‘Daughter Zion/Jerusalem’ is the best translation possible if the goal is to be “as literal as possible, as free as necessary.” NSRV and NAB translate accordingly.

The population of the city or a subset thereof is not denoted by the expression. Phrases like ‘the elders of Daughter Zion’ and ‘the wall of Daughter Zion’ (Lam 2:10, 18) cannot be understood in this way. The city is denoted by the expression, and because this is the case, the expression lends itself, as here, to transfer by metonymy to the population that inhabits it. It is better to reproduce rather than resolve the metonymy in translation. A translation like ‘fair’ or ‘lovely’ Zion is an attempt to do so. NJPSV renders accordingly.

(4) The translation ‘Behold your king! He will come to you’ captures the syntax of the original. A participle (בֹּאֲ) rather than a finite verb (בִּבֹּאֲ)

would have been used if a single phrase were intended. The translation in two phrases has the added advantage of bringing into sharp relief a set of themes and linguistic features shared in common by Zech 9:9 and Isa 40:9-10.

(5) The translation ‘Righteous and having salvation is he’ is wrongheaded on several counts. It reproduces the word order of the Hebrew, but that word order is the normal one in Hebrew. The equivalent word order in English is with the subject first. LXX, NRSV, and ESV copy the word order of the Hebrew. ISV and NJB correctly refrain from doing so. NIV and REB depart from the syntax of the Hebrew altogether.

‘Righteous’ (צַדִּיק) is a frequent stand-alone descriptor of right-behaving as opposed to wrong-behaving people in biblical literature. For a man of means, right behavior involved protecting the rights of others and helping those in need (Job 31). The sense in which a king is to be righteous is not far removed from the sense in which every individual is expected to be righteous. A righteous individual is one who does all in his power to advance the good of his fellows.

A king is expected to secure the rights and freedom of those in his care and vanquish those who mean to do them harm. In Zech 9:9, another descriptor, ‘victorious’ (נוֹשֵׁעַ), helps to bring this out. Just and victorious is what a king is supposed to be. The ideal king is described more extensively in Jer 23:5. In conjunction with a cognate of נוֹשֵׁעַ, צַדִּיק is elsewhere applied to Yahweh: ‘a righteous God and Savior / there is none besides me’ (אֵל צַדִּיק וּמוֹשִׁיעַ; Isa 45:21). The ability of Yahweh to secure the freedom and rights of those in his care is thereby described.

JPSV renders the phrase under discussion with ‘He is triumphant, and victorious;’ NJPSV with ‘He is victorious, triumphant.’ These translations allow the sense of צַדִּיק to be swallowed up in that of נוֹשֵׁעַ.

ESV’s ‘having salvation’ is a clumsy rendering of נוֹשֵׁעַ. The participle’s active sense and adjectival force are clear from the context. נוֹרָא, which means ‘awesome, fear-inspiring,’ is an example of another Niphal participle which, practically speaking, has an active sense. In the case of נוֹרָא, a person may be described as a recipient of fear, and in that sense, ‘fearsome’; in the case of נוֹשֵׁעַ, a person may be described as a recipient of salvation, and in that sense, ‘victorious.’ In the absence of a complement indicating an

agent, agency is left in the background. Divine agency is not emphasized until later in the larger unit (9:12-13; 14-17; note especially 9:16).

(6) ‘Lowly’ captures the semantic range of the adjective עָנִי better than the overspecific ‘gentle’ or ‘humble.’ For remarks on the significance of the use of this descriptor for the expected king, see below.

(7) Zion’s future king will come mounted on an ‘ass’ (חֲמֹר). The term refers to a wild or domesticated ass, male in gender. More precisely, he sits on a ‘donkey’ (עֵיר), or domesticated ass, male in gender. Expressed otherwise, the mountee is ‘a foal of she-asses’ (בֶּן־אֲתָנוֹת). The last expression describes the male animal as the offspring of generations of she-asses. The air of domesticity the expression carries with it transfers to the larger construction. It might be argued that חֲמֹר, עֵיר, and בֶּן־אֲתָנוֹת are gender-neutral rather than gender-specific designations. But that is not a straightforward way of construing the text. The poet would have used the corresponding feminine terms if that were his meaning.

None of the expressions used to describe the animal the king mounts refer to the animal’s youth. Nevertheless, LXX paraphrased the term occurring first with ‘a draught animal/beast of burden,’ and collapsed the final two expressions into a single noun + adjective phrase: ‘and a young colt.’ ESV, consciously or unconsciously, picks up on this last interpretation, and renders the noun עֵיר with ‘colt.’ JPSV also renders the noun with ‘colt.’ There is no linguistic justification for doing so, as a review of the noun’s occurrences elsewhere makes clear (cf. in particular Gen 32:16; Isa 30:6, 24). NJPSV correctly translates with ‘donkey.’

An עֵיר a king might mount would be young and vigorous as a matter of course. But the vigor and youth of the animal are not spoken of in the text.

### The Meaning of Zech 9:9 in Context

Zech 9:9 is part of a larger unit that anticipates a time in which the people of Yahweh’s perennial adversaries will be pacified and humiliated and Philistia incorporated within it (9:1-8). The king whose advent Jeremiah (23:5, etc.) and Ezekiel (34:23-31, etc.) also looked forward to is described according to ideal specifications. He will be strong to save and lowly and unassuming at the same time (9:9). The king will do without a professional army; he will dictate terms of peace to the people’s neighbors; and his rule shall extend from sea to sea (9:10).

It would have been understood that the king would enjoy Yahweh's favor because he chose to be 'lowly' (עָנִי), a trait exemplified by the king's selection of a donkey as his mount. It was a commonplace that Yahweh favors the self-effacing individual. The proud, on the other hand, meet his displeasure. Two proverbs are apropos to the subject matter:

3:3 אֲסֹלְלִים הוּא יִלְיָץ      וְלַעֲנָוִים יִתֵּן חֵן      Prov 3:34

3:3 טוֹב שְׁפַל־רוּחַ אֶת־עֲנָוִים      מִחֶלֶק שְׁלַל אֶת־גִּבּוֹרִים      Prov 16:19

As for scorers, he [Yahweh] will scorn them,  
but he accords favor to the lowly. (Prov 3:34)

Better to be downcast among the lowly  
than divide spoil with the proud. (Prov 16:19)

The *ketiv* of עֲנָוִים in both instances, it might be noted, is עֲנָיִים, the plural of עָנִי which occurs in Zech 9:9.

Yahweh also favored Moses, because, as Baruch Levine translates, 'he was exceedingly unassuming [עָנִי מְאֹד], more so than any [other] person on the face of the earth' (Num 12:3; Baruch A. Levine, *Numbers 1-20. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [AB 4; New York: Doubleday, 1993] 314).

It transpires from the last passage that humility is a virtue of a good leader. The king whose advent is anticipated in Zech 9:9 is described as having it and demonstrating it by the way he presents himself: 'lowly and mounted on an ass; on a donkey, a foal of she-asses.'

The above interpretation of Zech 9:9 takes the relationship of the "A" and B terms 'ass' and 'donkey' to be that of a parallelism of greater precision. The "C" term 'a foal of she-asses' adds atmosphere more than precision. Hypothetically, the relationship between the terms might have been otherwise.

The poetry of the Hebrew Bible is filled with examples in which an "A" term in one line is paralleled by a "B" term in the next line. Sometimes the "A" and "B" terms refer to a single external reality, as in the first part of Zech 9:9: 'daughter Zion' and 'daughter Jerusalem' are alternative ways of referring to one and the same city. On the other hand, "A" and "B" terms may refer to realities that complement one another, as in Zech 9:10: 'Ephraim/Jerusalem' and 'chariots/horses.'

Sometimes the “A” and “B” terms refer to the same external reality even though the terms are not, strictly speaking, synonymous. The following passage may illustrate the degree to which non-synonymity was allowed: ‘For three transgressions of Gaza, / for four, I will not revoke it’ (Amos 1:6). It might seem logical to take this as an example of a parallelism of greater precision, and interpret as follows: ‘For three . . . more precisely, for four.’ The transgressions actually listed, however, number one or at the most two, depending on how one counts. It is clear that the numbers ‘three’ and ‘four’ are evocative only.

Relatively straightforward examples of parallelism of greater precision include: Gen 4:23 (‘a man / [more precisely] a lad’) and Judg 5:25 (‘milk / [more precisely] cream’). The last example, part of the song of Deborah, has a counterpart in prose narrative. The less precise term, ‘milk,’ not ‘cream,’ is used to describe the proffered drink in that context (Judg 4:19).

As David J. A. Clines has argued, the meaning of a “parallelistic couplet” in biblical poetry does not reside in A nor in B, but in the whole couplet of A and B in which A is affected by its juxtaposition with B, and B by its juxtaposition with A (“The Parallelism of Greater Precision: Notes from Isaiah 40 for a Theory of Hebrew Poetry,” in *New Directions in Hebrew Poetry* (ed. Elaine R. Follis; JSOTSup 40; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987) 77-100; repr. idem, *On the Way to the Postmodern: Old Testament Essays 1967-1988. Volume 1* (JSOTSup 292; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998) 314-36; online [here](#)). In like fashion, the “A,” “B” and “C” terms in Zech 9:9b are to be interpreted in light of one another. The descriptors refer to one and the same animal in the economy of the text, but they are not interchangeable. They complement one another. In the poetic economy of the text, not one of the descriptors is superfluous.

Gen 49:11 is sometimes thought to be echoed in Zech 9:9:

3:3	וְלִשְׂרָקָה בְּנֵי אֲתָנּוּ	אֲסָרֵי לֶגְפָן עִירָה
3:3	וּבָדָם עֲנָבִים סוּתָה	כִּבְּסֵ בֵינָן לְבָשׁוּ

One who ties his ass to the vine,  
 To the stock his she-ass’s foal,  
 He washes his robe in wine,  
 His mantle in blood of grapes.

‘His ass (עִירָה) / his she-ass’s foal (בְּנֵי אֲתָנּוּ)’ is another example of a parallelism of greater precision. The fantastic fertility of the land of Judah seems to be described by these images. The vine that grows there is so strong

that an ass may be tethered to it without fear of destroying the vine. The wine is so abundant that it dyes the clothes of Judah red when he tramples the vintage in the press.

It is easy, of course, to read Gen 49:11 as if two beasts, not one, are spoken of. NJPSV translates: ‘He tethers his ass to a vine / His ass’s foal to a choice vine.’ Faced with a like translation, the unsuspecting reader might naturally conjure up an image of a mother ass and her foal side by side at the edge of a vineyard. The *ketiv* of the text, which could be understood to mean ‘a she-ass’ rather than ‘his ass,’ may preserve a vestige of a construal in this sense. But ‘his ass,’ male in gender, is the better reading here, and the one preferred in the masoretic tradition.

### Excursus on the Interpretation of Zech 9:9 in the Gospels of John and Matthew

As Ehud Ben Zvi notes (“The Twelve Minor Prophets: Introduction and Annotations,” in *The Jewish Study Bible* [ed. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler; New York: Oxford University Press, 2004] 1139-1274; 1250), “Many ancient readers found in Zechariah numerous references to messianic times. As expected, some early Christian readers understood them in christological terms (see for instance, Mark 14.27 and Zech 13.7; Matt 27.9 and Zech 11.12-13; John 19.37 and Zech. 12.10; John 12.15 and Zech 9.9). Rabbinic Judaism interpreted many of these texts in relation to a messianic time still to come (e.g., Zech. 3.8; 6.12 in the Targum; in relation to Zech 6.12 see *Num. Rab.* 18.21; for Zech 9.9 see *Gen. Rab.* 56.2, 98.9; and for Zech 12.10 as pointing to the Messiah from the House of Joseph, see *b. Sukkah* 52a).”

John 12:15 appears to understand the relationship between the “A” and “B” terms under discussion as an example of a parallelism of greater precision. A single animal is spoken of. Matt 21:1-7, on the other hand, presupposes an understanding of the “A” and “B” terms as referring to distinct realities, a ‘donkey’ and a ‘donkey’s colt,’ like ‘Ephraim’ and ‘Jerusalem’ and ‘chariots’ and ‘horses’ in Zech 9:10. An ancient exegetical tradition which read Zech 9:9 and Gen 49:11 in light of one another may have favored this. For the Matthew passage as explicable in terms of rabbinic exegetical practices of the time, see David Instone-Brewer, “The Two Asses of Zechariah 9:9 in Matthew 21,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 54 (2003) 89-98.

Whether Jesus mounted a single animal, as John has it, or two animals (in succession, one might infer), as Matthew has it, is a matter that cannot be decided by determining what the author of Zech 9:9 had in mind when he wrote what he did.

It seems fair to assume that Zech 9:9 as it was understood in his day would have been accommodated by Jesus if his entry into Jerusalem took place with a sense of messianic awareness. The event needed to be intelligible to those who witnessed it.

If Jesus did not accommodate the expectations of those who celebrated his entry into Jerusalem, the gospel writers will have accommodated the expectations of those for whom they wrote.

The discrepancy between the gospel accounts may have the following origin. The author of the gospel of Matthew knew that Zech 9:9 prophesied the coming of the Messiah. As Instone-Brewer points out in his aforementioned essay, “we have to look at the matter through the eyes of Matthew, the first century Jewish exegete” (98). Accepted exegetical practice of the day favored taking the “A” and “B” terms of items in parallelism as referring to distinct entities, and would have led Matthew to assume that Zech 9:9 speaks of two asses, not one. Two asses must therefore have been involved in Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem. He wrote up the episode accordingly: not to have done so, from his point of view, would have been misleading.

### Excursus on ISV Zech 9:9

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion;  
 cry out, O daughter of Jerusalem!  
 Look! Your king is coming to you.  
 He is righteous,  
 and is bringing salvation with him.  
 He is humble,  
 and is riding on a colt,  
 the foal of a donkey.

ISV’s handling of Zech 9:9 is curious. It seeks to reflect the poetry of the underlying text in translation, in itself an admirable goal. But it does so by dividing the text into what *in English* – not Hebrew - are roughly equivalent prosodic phrases. The lineation of the underlying text is disregarded. Where the Hebrew has צַדִּיק וְנֹשֵׁעַ הוּא ‘He is just and victorious’ (a single half-

line), ISV has ‘He is righteous, // and is bringing salvation with him.’ Where the Hebrew has עֲנִי וְרֹכֵב עַל־הַמֹּר ‘lowly, mounted on an ass’ (once again, a single half-line), ISV has ‘He is humble, // and is riding on a colt.’ To be sure, ISV’s rendering has an advantage. It brings out the vertical parallelism of צַדִּיק and עֲנִי with great clarity. But ISV does so by repeatedly departing from the principle of one-to-one correspondence in terms of semantics, syntax, and prosody.

ISV’s translation of מֹר, עֵיר, and בְּנִי־אֲתָנֹת is objectionable. It collapses the three expressions into two, neither of which is “as literal as possible and as free as necessary.” ‘Colt’ is simply wrong: neither מֹר nor עֵיר mean ‘colt.’

To be sure, ‘colt’ harmonizes with OG and Matthew 21:1-7. Perhaps ISV harmonizes its translation of OT passages with NT’s understanding of them. A high view of Scripture, I would argue, militates against this approach. Scripture itself cites and interprets other scripture in more than one way. A parade example is the treatment of Isa 6:9-10 in NT sources (Matt 13:10-17; Mark 4:10-12; Luke 8:9-10; John 12:40; Acts 28:26). Here is a synoptic view:

Mat 13:14-15 (≈Acts 28:26)	Mark 4:12	John 12:40
[καὶ ἀναπληροῦται αὐτοῖς ἡ προφητεία Ἡσαΐου ἢ λέγουσα :]	[ἐκείνοις δὲ τοῖς ἕξω ἐν παραβολαῖς τὰ πάντα γίνεται]	
ἀκοῆ ἄκούσετε καὶ οὐ μὴ συνῆτε, καὶ βλέποντες βλέπετε καὶ οὐ μὴ ἴδητε.	ἵνα βλέποντες βλέπωσιν καὶ μὴ ἴδωσιν καὶ ἀκούοντες ἀκούωσιν	
ἐπαχύνθη γὰρ ἡ καρδία τοῦ λαοῦ τούτου, καὶ τοῖς ὤσιν βαρέως ἤκουσαν καὶ τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς αὐτῶν ἐκάμμυσαν μήποτε ἴδωσιν τοῖς ὀφθαλμοῖς		τετύφλωκεν αὐτῶν τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς καὶ ἐπώρρωσεν αὐτῶν τὴν καρδίαν, ἵνα μὴ ἴδωσιν τοῖς ὀφθαλμοῖς
καὶ τοῖς ὤσιν ἀκούωσιν καὶ τῇ καρδίᾳ συνῶσιν καὶ ἐπιστρέψωσιν καὶ ἰάσονται αὐτούς.	καὶ μὴ συνιῶσιν μήποτε ἐπιστρέψωσιν καὶ ἀφεθῆ ἑαυτοῖς	καὶ νοήσωσιν τῇ καρδίᾳ καὶ στραφῶσιν, καὶ ἰάσονται αὐτούς.

ISV Mat 13:14-15 (≈Acts 28:26)	Mark 4:12	John 12:40
[With them the prophecy of Isaiah is being fulfilled, which says:]	[But to those on the outside, everything comes in parables]	
	so that	
‘You will listen and listen but never understand. You will look and look but never comprehend.	‘they may see clearly but not perceive, and they may hear clearly but not understand,	
For this people's heart has become dull, and their ears are hard of hearing. They have shut their eyes so that they might not see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them.’	Otherwise they might turn around and be forgiven.’	He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart,  so that they might not perceive with their eyes,  and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them.

Matthew and Acts stick to the unrevised Greek translation (OG). Mark’s wording hews closer to the Hebrew than does OG in one instance, and may be indebted to a non-OG translation of the Hebrew. In other instances, it renders more freely. John’s wording is the most periphrastic, but hews closest to the harshness of the original.

The NT authors and OG before them rework the parent text in a variety of ways. The resultant discrepancies in terms of content are not so severe that a systematic theology could not subsume them within a larger whole. But the texts in question, the Hebrew, the Greek, and NT authors’ appropriation and rielaboration of one or both, cannot and should not be assimilated to each other. They intend to say different things.

The ISV exercises extreme care in respecting the differences between Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and Acts in synoptic passages. The translation would do well to respect the differences between OT passages and the interpretation(s) found of them in the NT.

Scripture is like a grand edifice built over the centuries by many and diverse hands. Its very disharmonies contribute to its grandeur. In my view, those who remove the disharmonies commit an act of vandalism.