

ADVENT BURRO

Luke 1:46-56

A sermon by Rev. Dr. G. Jacob Bolton on the Third Sunday of Advent, December 11, 2022, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia at the 8:30 AM service.

With today being the Sunday we celebrate the annual Christmas Pageant, we all have the Christmas story on our minds. I am sure you all know the tale goes: it's a census, the time of Caesar Augustus and Quirinius, angels, unexpected parents, and a trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem, during which Mary rides what on her journey south? A donkey. But dearly beloved, 8:30 worshippers, from what section of scripture do we learn that Mary rides a donkey? Let's take a look, shall we, and let's use the process of elimination.

The Gospel of Mark has no birth story, and John has the unique "in the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God,"¹ which means neither Mark nor John mentions a donkey. Matthew and Luke are where we get the nativity scenes that have permeated our culture, but a brief glance shows that Matthew doesn't even have a journey south: Joseph wakes up from a dream, takes Mary as his wife, she has a son and names him Jesus. Quite straightforward. So, it must be from Luke right? This, friends, is Luke 2:3-7:

³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son."

No donkey! What does this mean? Well, scripturally speaking, we are not given the specific mode of transportation Mary took to arrive in Bethlehem. According to sacred scripture, she got there, somehow, Jesus was born, and it was all good. But in order for us to find the genesis of the donkey story, most beloved of Nativity characters, we need to look elsewhere, we need to look outside the Bible in the non-canonical text, the Gospel of James.

Not to be confused with the Epistle of James, which did make it into canon, the Gospel of James, which again did not, deals with the pre-motherhood life of Mary, the infancy of Jesus, and the immaculate conception of both of these figures. And it is from the 17th chapter of this source that we encounter Mary, great with child, and Joseph, knowing he needs to travel to Bethlehem for a census when the text says:

"And so Joseph saddled his donkey and had Mary get on it. Halfway through the trip Mary said to him, 'Joseph, help me down from the donkey – the child inside me is about to be born.' And he helped her down and said to her, 'Where will I take you to give you some privacy, since this place is out in the open?' He found a cave nearby and took her inside."

And that is where Mary gave birth to Jesus in this non-canonical, completely unsanctioned text.

But why do we hold onto this donkey, from this noncanonical gospel when the rest didn't make it into canon? What makes the Gospel of James so different? Well, as you all know there are four gospels that did make it into sacred scripture, and these four all share a common theme. They all want the reader to learn about the life, teachings, passion, and resurrection, of one person in particular, and that person is Jesus. But regarding the gospel of James, that isn't necessarily the case.

¹ John 1:1.

The Gospel of James is a second-century infancy gospel which tells of the miraculous conception of the Virgin Mary, her parents and early upbringing, her marriage to Joseph, the journey of the couple to Bethlehem, the birth of Jesus, and events immediately following. It is the earliest surviving text that names the perpetual virginity of Mary – the belief that Mary herself was immaculately conceived by the Holy Spirit – and that Mary maintained her virginity both prior to the birth of Jesus, as well as for the rest of her life. In an attempt to textually prove this point, there are two second-century medical examinations administered to Mary that are described in detail, which not only are difficult to read, but led in part to this text being condemned by Pope Innocent I in 405.

But prior to that point, this text had a very good run. Origen of Alexandria, one of the most prominent early Greek church theologians references this text often, and he died in the year 254, which has led New Testament Scholar Bart Ehrman to believe that the Gospel of James was written around the year 150. So for over 250 quite formative years of our faith tradition, this text was in circulation amongst churches, faith communities, monasteries, and institutions of higher learning. In other words, this text was read and preached on during early Christian worship services for a duration of time in history that is longer than the United States has officially been a country. I need not comment to all of you “inside the beltway-ers” how texts that are written at one particular moment, may or may not be interpreted differently “throughout the fullness of time.”

Still, in sum, the Gospel of James was in wide circulation for at least 250 years of antiquity – and that was clearly long enough for the donkey character to stick. People made art. People created tradition. And for us today, that is certainly the point, because unlike Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, whose main character and primary focus is Jesus, the Gospel of James main character and primary focus – ultimately why it was not included in canon – is Mary, the mother and the bearer of the Savior of the World.

So now we know where the donkey came from, not from sacred cannon, but from the Gospel of James. But why did Mary ride a donkey? For if she is the central figure of the entire 25-chapter Gospel of James, a longer text than all of our canonical gospels save Matthew, clearly the donkey points us to something. And friends I assure you that it does.

First, let’s take a look at the role donkeys play throughout scripture. Donkeys are important beasts of burden for a nomadic fertile crescent community that lives so intimately with the land. They carry riders, transport goods, and provide unique spiritual guidance. Proving their elevated status among animals, donkeys are mentioned in Ten Commandments, the primary laws of the covenant people, this from Exodus 20:17, “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, male or female slave, ox, donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.” Nothing about a dog or cat – remember this is a different culture. Further, donkeys, just like humans, must be given sabbath – one day’s rest a week. Later in Exodus we read when you see a donkey struggling under its load you must help the donkey even if you hate the owner. “If you help your enemy’s donkey,” rabbinic commentators add, “you pave the way for peace, friendship, and community.”

Professor at Vancouver School of Theology Rabbi Laura Duhan-Kaplan, in her mesmerizing book *Mouth of the Donkey: Reimagining Biblical Animals*, declares that early biblical authors and lawmakers, “respected donkeys for their physical skills, sure feet, strong back, adaptable diet, but also for their intellectual and moral qualities, donkeys are quick learning, loyal, careful.” In fact, they show up in more classical biblical tales than we may first recollect. When Abraham sets out to offer his son Isaac on the altar, he saddles up his donkey and sets out. Pretty foundational Abrahamic tradition text. We have the famous prophet Balaam and his speaking donkey. Abigail rides out on her donkey to avert a massacre and then marries David, who later becomes the King. And, speaking of kings, on Palm Sunday, when Jesus rides a donkey through the streets of Jerusalem, the point is made very clear. Both the prophet Zechariah and the gospel writer Matthew see the Messiah enter Jerusalem on a donkey because they have associated the animal with hope, new beginnings, divine guidance, and peace.

But what does this have to do with the gospel of James? First, it is clear throughout the Gospel of James that the author has all four canonical gospels to work with as source material because they are directly quoted throughout the text. If you read the entire thing, you can see references to stories that are found specifically from each of the four canonical gospels. Our biblical passage for today is the Magnificat from the first chapter of Luke, and even the Magnificat is found in the Gospel of James. So, there is both a Hebraic scriptural understanding and also an early New Testament writing familiarity that is at play, and at least I believe the intention is to highlight the importance of Mary by having her ride so hopeful, stable, and peace declaring an animal.

But additionally, this gospel was written in Syria – a bit further afield than Israel and Palestine. And donkeys in an ancient Syrian context have even different symbolism and point us to even more understanding of the donkey and why it was included with Mary in this text.

According to Adrienne Mayor, research scholar in the History and Philosophy of Science program at Stanford, in her riveting text *Flying Snakes and Griffin Claws and Other Classical Myths, Historical Oddities, and Scientific Curiosities* she hints that the Syrian donkey referred to in this text is a specific type of animal, native to the region in which this text was written, that was associated with and used to describe Arab Warrior Queens. Nomadic tribes of warrior queens were associated with and likened to these donkey's native to Syria, because they were strong as thoroughbreds, beautiful, fast, fierce, and completely impossible to domesticate or tame. An Arab Warrior Queen and a donkey, in the Syrian literary context, was royal, beautiful, and wild.

Why does Mary ride a donkey? Because symbolically, the donkey that Mary rode in this non-canonical gospel, a text that was written primarily about her, and not her son, includes her riding atop a symbol that combines all of the Hebraic donkey wisdom and lore on the one hand, all of the hope, divine guidance and promise of peace that we have from the scriptures that did make it into canon, while on the other hand her mount is the type of animal that was also associated with warrior royalty, unbridled energy, and otherworldly beauty all being ridden by a woman that was about to bring forth something brand new for the benefit of the whole world. What better steed for the mother of Christ, the mother of the Prince of Peace, the mother of the King of Kings to ride in a text that is all about her?

Today as we read from this beautiful song the Magnificat, during which two “great with child” women dream about how their offspring will tear down the mighty and rise up the meek and humble, a text that clearly indicates hope, divine guidance and the fierce warrior queen like chutzpah that would be needed to bring all that forth, what better image than the donkey? And who better to usher in that new day, the day for which we all yearn, than the children of this church leading a Christmas Pageant? For they are the ones who fill us with such promise and hope, the joy of new beginnings, all while their unbridled energy at time can also sweep over us like wave after wave of mounted Arab Warrior Queens.

What I have loved about researching the Advent donkey, a character with character perhaps, is the stunning melting pot of cultural references that lead us to this ideal image. Stability, wisdom, guidance and hope. Beauty, newness of life and the royal spirit to tear it all down and start again. Today as we join Mary on her journey, let us travel alongside on a donkey of our own as we honor her memory, her son, and the spiritual movement she heled birth. For Mary's soul does magnify the Lord, and so too do the souls, and the light, and the faces, and the voices, of each one of you. Amen.