

SITTING ON TWO ASSES?

SECOND THOUGHTS ON THE TWO-ANIMAL INTERPRETATION OF
MATTHEW 21:7

Wayne Coppins

Summary

The main thesis of this article is that the ‘two-animal’ interpretation of Matthew 21:7, according to which Matthew speaks of Jesus as sitting on two animals, can be shown to be more probable than the ‘multiple-garments’ interpretation, according to which Jesus is understood to be sitting on multiple garments on a single animal. Prior to my analysis of Matthew 21:7 I discuss the related question of why Matthew’s account of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem involves two animals rather than one, arguing that the ‘history conformed to Scripture interpretation’ is more probable than the ‘Scripture conformed to history’ interpretation. Following it, I advance a more tentative interpretation of the surprising outcome of Matthew’s interaction with Scripture.

1. Introduction

In Matthew 21:1-11, Jesus and his disciples arrive at Bethphage, near Jerusalem. Jesus then sends two disciples to go and find ‘a donkey bound and a colt with her’ (21:2). The disciples find the two animals and bring them to Jesus. They put garments on them and Jesus is then said to sit on them (21:7). A large crowd spreads their garments and branches on the road and those following cry out ‘Hosanna!’ (21:9). When Jesus enters Jerusalem, ‘the whole city was in turmoil, saying, “Who is this?”’ (21:10).

Matthew 21:7 can be understood to mean that Matthew speaks of Jesus sitting on two animals. It is this oft-repeated interpretation that I would like to investigate with regard to the arguments for and against it. Notably, I began researching this article with the intention of

challenging the plausibility of the ‘two-animal’ interpretation of Matthew 21:7, only to become convinced of its likelihood in the course of my research.

My argument shall proceed as follows. I will begin by briefly establishing the fact that Matthew speaks of two animals in Matthew 21:1-12. This is striking because the parallel pericopes in Mark 11:1-11, Luke 19:28-36 and John 12:12-19 only speak of one animal. Building upon this point, I shall then present two competing explanations for why Matthew has two animals, before advancing arguments for affirming the ‘history conformed to Scripture’ interpretation. In the central section of my article I will then discuss the interpretation of Matthew 21:7 in three steps. First, I will draw attention to the grammatical ambiguity of this verse and set forth the views of several advocates of the ‘multiple-garments’ interpretation, including my own perspective prior to undertaking this research. Secondly, I will advance three arguments in support of the majority position that Matthew 21:7 speaks of Jesus sitting on two animals rather than on multiple garments on a single animal. Thirdly, I shall then draw attention to the need to distinguish the question of whether or not Matthew 21:7 *speaks of* Jesus sitting on two animals from the much more difficult question of what, if anything, Matthew may have *envisaged* or had in mind. After this central section, I will then provide a more tentative analysis of the surprising outcome of Matthew’s interaction with Scripture, before summarising the contributions of my study in the conclusion.

2. Two Animals: Scripture Conformed to History, or History Conformed to Scripture?

The fact that Matthew speaks of two animals rather than one in Matthew 21:1-12 is made clear at multiple points. First, Jesus informs his disciples in Matthew 21:2 that they will find a donkey bound and a colt with (μετ’) her. Secondly, the citation of Zechariah 9:9 in Matthew 21:5 speaks of the king as ‘mounted on (ἐπί) a donkey and on (ἐπί) a colt, the foal of an ass’.¹ In contrast to the LXX (but similar to the

¹ While it is true that some manuscripts lack the second ἐπί (C D W Θ I¹³ 33 Byz latt mae bo), the external attestation of this reading is not particularly strong, and it is more plausibly explained as a scribal ‘correction’.

Hebrew), Matthew's text includes the preposition ἐπί before both donkey and colt, perhaps to make clear that two animals are in view.² Thirdly, this reading is assumed in 21:7ab, which explicitly states that 'they brought the donkey and the colt and they placed the garments on *them* (αὐτῶν)'.³

While there is agreement *that* Matthew speaks of two animals, there is no consensus on *why* he has done so. I will approach this interpretative crux by first presenting two competing explanations and then marshaling arguments for preferring one of these over the other.⁴ R. T. France is an excellent representative of the first line of thought. He suggests that Matthew was aware that two animals had been present, i.e. that the historical event that took place involved two animals. He reasons that Matthew 'enjoyed the fact that the wording of Zechariah's oracle can be read as including both mother and foal, and so mentioned them both'. He then explains that Matthew's mention of the second donkey is *not* due to a misunderstanding of the Hebrew synonymous parallelism in Zechariah 9:9 but rather 'to a typically Jewish interest in the form of the text, so that even though he knew it referred to only one animal, its wording nonetheless lent itself to the mention of the other'.⁵

France's characteristically well-argued explanation may be described as a 'Scripture conformed to history' interpretation, since it understands Matthew's scriptural exegesis of Zechariah to have been shaped or influenced by his (perceived) knowledge of the historical

² According to Maarten Menken, *Matthew's Bible: The Old Testament Text of the Evangelist* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2004): 106, 113, the second ἐπί is not found in Symmachus, Theodotus or Quinta, though it is *possibly* paralleled in Aquila's translation (see Ziegler's edition). On the basis of Matthew's interpretation of the anarthrous ὄνος in Zech. 9:9 as a she-donkey, Menken suggests that 'Matthew made use of an existing Greek translation of Zech. 9,9, which is best characterized as a revised LXX' (115). Contrast Robert Gundry, *The Use of the Old Testament in St. Matthew's Gospel. With Special Reference to the Messianic Hope* (Leiden: Brill, 1967): 198: 'it is very clear from Mt's disagreements with the LXX in this quotation that he had the Hebrew text before him and was endeavoring to give a closer rendering of the Hebrew than the LXX had done'.

³ This would not, however, be the case if we were instead to champion the authenticity of the reading αὐτῶ (Θ I¹³ 33 pc) or αὐτον (D Φ 1 2211). But the external attestation of both readings is relatively weak, and more importantly these readings are more plausibly explained as scribal 'corrections'.

⁴ It would also be possible, of course, to combine each of these interpretations with other explanations, especially those appealing to additional scriptural connections.

⁵ See R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007): 778-79.

event. If the qualification ‘perceived’ is stressed, this description can also be applied to Krister Stendahl’s somewhat weaker thesis that ‘the only reason for such a treatment of the O.T. text must be that Matthew knew a tradition that spoke about two asses’. Likewise, it could include Barnabas Lindars’s supposition that the two animals derive from Matthew’s *assumption* that if a previously unriden foal was present, such a young foal would not yet have been separated from its mother, therefore two animals must have been present. The key point is that for all of these scholars Matthew’s interpretation of Scripture has been shaped by his (actual, traditional or assumed) knowledge of the historical event.⁶

A second explanation is that Matthew may instead have *shaped* his narrative of the event from his exegesis of Scripture and in particular that he has *created* a second animal in order to conform his telling of the story to his ‘two-animal’ interpretation of the Hebrew parallelism in Zechariah 9:9. On this reading then, the historical event is understood to involve only one animal, whereas the second animal is explained as a creation of Matthew brought about by his scriptural exegesis. In the characteristically trenchant words of David Friedrich Strauss: ‘the mare did not go first: it went along only in the mind of the First Evangelist’.⁷ In contrast to France, Stendahl and Lindars, this interpretative tradition contends that *in the matter of the two animals* it is Matthew’s exegetical activity that has informed his narrative of the event rather than his (perceived) knowledge of the event that has informed his exegetical activity. Accordingly, this explanation may be described as a ‘history conformed to Scripture’ interpretation. (Note that this

⁶ See K. Stendahl, *The School of St. Matthew and Its Use of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968): 200; B. Lindars, *New Testament Apologetic: The Doctrinal Significance of the Old Testament Quotations* (London: SCM, 1961): 114; France, *Matthew*, 778 n. 28. I hope it is clear from my discussion that the interpretations of Stendahl and Lindars do not necessarily assume that Matthew’s tradition or his assumption is accurate in relation to the number of animals, whereas France appears to imply that Matthew’s knowledge on this point is accurate.

⁷ Cited from A. Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: First Complete Edition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001; tr. by W. Montgomery, J. R. Coates, Susan Cupitt, and John Bowden): 74. Cf. Albert Schweitzer, *Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung* (9th edn; Mohr: Tübingen, 1984): 115: ‘zumal ihm kein Vorgehen des Muttertieres zu statten kam, welches nur im Kopf des ersten Evangelisten mitgelaufen ist’. The translation cited above is preferable to the one provided by George Eliot. See David Friedrich Strauss, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* (London: Sonnenschein & Co, 1892; tr. from 4th German edn by George Eliot): 554: ‘especially as we are not to suppose that it was preceded by its mother, this circumstance having entered into the representation of the first evangelist only’.

interpretation does not necessarily assume that the whole event was created from Scripture. On the contrary, most of its advocates would probably dispute this conclusion.)

In my view, the second line of interpretation is more probable for a number of reasons. Lest the true points of disagreement be missed, it is important to stress at the outset that advocates of this interpretation are under no compulsion to attribute Matthew's 'two-animal' interpretation of Zechariah 9:9 to a *Gentile* misunderstanding of the Hebrew parallelism.⁸ On the contrary, like France they are free to attribute it to a *Jewish* exegetical tendency to make every word count, a feature that is also found elsewhere in the NT as well as in Qumran and the Rabbinic writings.⁹ Similarly, while the 'history conformed to Scripture' interpretation *may* postulate that Matthew failed to recognise the Hebrew parallelism, it is also compatible with the assumption that though aware of the parallelism Matthew's interest in the word-for-word fulfilment of Scripture moved him to exploit the form of the text in such a way as to speak of two animals.¹⁰ In short, the 'history conformed to Scripture' interpretation allows for agreement or disagreement with France with regard to Matthew's Jewish heritage and the extent to which he knew what he was doing, so that these questions should *not* be perceived as the point of difference in the two interpretations.

On the basis of which arguments, then, do I regard the 'history conformed to Scripture' interpretation as more likely than the 'Scripture conformed to history' interpretation, particularly as

⁸ This argument is advanced by John P. Meier, *The Vision of Matthew: Christ, Church, and Morality in the First Gospel* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979): 17-25.

⁹ Cf. John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005): 837 n. 68: 'The overly literal reading which produces the two animals is not, however, a mark of unfamiliarity with Jewish texts. The same phenomenon can be noted at Qumran (CD 7:18-21) and among the rabbis (some identifying two beasts in Zech. 9:9—see the texts at STR-B, 1:842-44) and plays an important role in John 19:23-25.' Cf. also David Instone-Brewer, 'The Two Asses of Zechariah 9:9 in Matthew 21', *TynBul* 54 (2003): 87-98, who goes further and relates Matthew's reading to a specific assumption in first-century rabbinic Judaism, arguing that 'although non-rabbinic Judaism and also later rabbinic authorities accepted parallelism in Scripture, the rabbinic Judaism of the first century assumed that Scripture contained no parallelism' (90). See further David Instone-Brewer, *Techniques and Assumptions in Jewish Exegesis before 70 AD* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1992): 166-77.

¹⁰ Cf. Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21-28* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005; tr. by James E. Crouch): 5-6.

represented by France? The first objection to France's argument is that the other three evangelists all speak of only one animal.¹¹ Accordingly, while it is conceivable that Matthew alone has retained the fact that there were, in fact, two animals, it is perhaps more likely that he is responsible for adding one. This conclusion, I believe, receives further support from the fact that Matthew shows a tendency, for other reasons, to double entities elsewhere (cf. Matt. 8:28; 9:27; 20:30).¹² Moreover, it is strengthened by the fact that the doubling in Matthew 21:1-12 can plausibly be explained as a result of Matthew's scriptural exegesis. This line of argumentation, I think, is fairly strong; at the same time, I recognise that it is not completely decisive. Moreover, I acknowledge that it does not apply as directly to Stendahl and Lindars's weaker versions of this tradition of interpretation.

Another argument for the 'history conformed to Scripture' interpretation is that Matthew elsewhere shows a marked interest in the literal or word-for-word fulfilment of biblical material. As Ulrich Luz notes this is evident from texts such as 4:13, 15 (Zebulun and Naphtali), and 27:7, 10 (potter's field).¹³ Similarly, Maarten Menken observes that 'in a comparable way, the quotation from Zech. 11,13 in Matthew 27,9-10 exerted some influence on the preceding narrative: the undetermined amount of money in Mark 14,11 has become thirty silver pieces in Matthew 26,15 (see also 27,3:5).'¹⁴ In view of these texts, it is not implausible that this interest in word-for-word fulfilment may have moved Matthew to exploit the form of the scriptural text in such a way as to speak of two animals, which, in turn, led to a

¹¹ Cf. e.g. David Friedrich Strauss, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* (London: Sonnenschein & Co, 1892; tr. from 4th German edn by George Eliot): 554.

¹² Cf. Craig Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1999): 492: 'It is thus possible that Matthew finds two animals in the text because he had both animals in one of his traditions. At the same time, in view of his doubling of other figures in his narratives, this may simply be Matthew's way of underlining the importance of the event (8.28; 9.27; 20.30)'. In my view, the language of 'doubling' is not necessarily dependent on a particular solution to the Synoptic problem. Rather, it is based on the more general judgment that when Matthew has two items rather than one item in several different stories that only contain one item in the parallel versions of these stories, then the most probable explanation is that Matthew has 'doubled' the entity in question in some or all of these instances rather than that he already had two of them in his tradition in each case. This line of thought is, however, strengthened if one assumes that Matthew used Mark, as I do, since this shows that there was only one item in each of the stories in at least one of his sources.

¹³ See Luz, *Matthew*, 5-6.

¹⁴ See Menken, *Matthew's Bible*, 110.

corresponding change in his presentation of the narrative, especially if this exegetical approach had currency with his hearers/readers.¹⁵ In sum, for all these reasons, I do not think that France, Stendahl and Lindars are correct in suggesting that Matthew's interpretation of Scripture *here* is best explained by appealing to his knowledge of the historical event, traditions associated with the event, or an assumption pertaining to the event.

Having set forth my reasons for adopting the 'history conformed to Scripture' interpretation, let me now turn to the central question of my article: does Matthew 21:7 speak of Jesus sitting on two animals or does it speak of Jesus sitting on multiple garments on a single animal?

3. 'And he sat upon them': Two Animals or Multiple Garments?

If Matthew has indeed made two animals out of one, then it is understandable, if rather inappropriate, that the modern exegete may experience a certain amount of *Schadenfreude* in this discovery. It does not, however, usually end there. Instead, interpreters zero in on the end of Matthew 21:7, which is interpreted to mean that Matthew has Jesus *sitting* on two animals: 'they brought the ass and the foal to him and they placed the garments upon them (the two animals) and he sat upon them (the two animals)'. While this reading is grammatically possible, the grammar also permits—and may even favour¹⁶—the following interpretation: 'they brought the ass and the foal to him and they placed the garments upon them (the two animals) and he sat upon them (the garments)'. In fact, Ulrich Luz states that 'since Origen ... as a rule the church's interpretation has understood ἐπ'αὐτῶν αὐτῶν to refer to the garments'.¹⁷

Not surprisingly, a number of recent interpreters have continued to argue that the second reading is preferable and have interpreted it to

¹⁵ Cf. Luz, *Matthew*, 5-6. See also n. 9 above.

¹⁶ See Luz, *Matthew*, 8. Cf. further Craig Blomberg, 'Matthew' in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007): 64-65, who stresses that 'the nearest antecedent for the final "them" is "garments", which need not refer to the garments on more than one animal'.

¹⁷ Luz, *Matthew*, 8.

mean that Jesus sat on the garments on only one animal.¹⁸ Robert Gundry, for example, thinks it doubtful that Matthew intends his readers to visualise ‘a trick rider balancing himself on two animals at the same time’. Instead, he argues that it is the garments alone that were draped over the two animals, whereas Jesus sat on top of the garments only on the colt. Gundry does not, however, conclude that it is insignificant that both animals are garmented. On the contrary, he suggests that ‘the association of the garmented mother makes a kind of wide throne’, and reasons that ‘this widening of the throne to play up Jesus’ royal majesty appears to underlie Matthew’s importation of a second animal and his knowing breakup of the synonymous parallelism in Zech. 9:9’.¹⁹ France likewise assumes that Jesus only rode on one animal, though without adopting Gundry’s view of the significance of the garmented mother. Instead, he suggests that ‘the festive occasion required that the mother, even though not ridden, should also be given a saddle cloth’.²⁰ Finally, with greater caution and less explanation, David Turner states that ‘most likely Matthew means that Jesus rides sitting on the garments spread on the colt (cf. Mark 11:7; Luke 19:35; John 12:4), although the garments have been spread on both mother and colt’.²¹

As noted in my introduction, I agreed with this tradition of interpretation when I began researching this article. My rationale at that time was simple: when choosing between two grammatically possible readings it is preferable to select the reading that avoids an unnecessarily difficult idea, in this case that of Jesus sitting on two animals. In the course of my research, however, three arguments have shifted my thinking in favour of the ‘two-animal’ interpretation of Matthew 21:7.

First, as David Instone-Brewer has cogently argued, ‘it is difficult to get away from the conclusion that Matthew wanted to include both

¹⁸ See e.g. Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel of S. Matthew* (London: Scott, 1915): 286; Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982): 410; France, *Matthew*, 778; Blomberg, ‘Matthew’, 64-65; David L. Turner, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008): 496. It is, of course, theoretically possible to adopt the ‘multiple-garments’ interpretation and yet have Jesus sitting on multiple garments on both animals rather than on multiple garments on only one animal.

¹⁹ Gundry, *Matthew*, 410.

²⁰ France, *Matthew*, 778.

²¹ Turner, *Matthew*, 496.

animals in every respect of the event, including the act of being ridden'. In support of this claim Instone-Brewer juxtaposes the following texts from Mark 11 and Matthew 21:²²

Mark 11:2	you will find <u>a colt</u> tied	
Matt. 21:2	you will find an ass tied and a colt with her	
Mark 11:2-3	untie <u>it</u> and bring it...	the Lord has need of <u>it</u>
Matt. 21:2-3	untie <u>them</u> and bring them...	the Lord has need of <u>them</u>
Mark 11:7	they threw their garments on <u>it</u> and he sat on <u>it</u>	
Matt. 21:7	they threw their garments on <u>them</u> and he sat on <u>them</u>	

In other words, throughout Matthew 21 we see Matthew consistently changing Mark's *one* animal to his *two* animals in relation to every aspect of the event.²³

Secondly, building on Instone-Brewer's observation, a more precise comparison of Mark 11:7 and Matthew 21:7 lends further support to the thesis that Matthew 21:7 *speaks of* Jesus sitting on two animals. Let us look at the two versions:

Mark 11:7	Matt. 21:7
a) καὶ φέρουσιν τὸν πῶλον πρὸς τὸν Ἰησοῦν and they convey <u>the colt</u> to Jesus	ἤγαγον τὴν ὄνον καὶ τὸν πῶλον they brought <u>the ass and the colt</u>
b) καὶ ἐπιβάλλουσιν αὐτῷ τὰ ἱμάτια αὐτῶν and they throw to <u>it</u> their garments	καὶ ἐπέθηκαν ἐπ' αὐτῶν τὰ ἱμάτια and they put on <u>them</u> the garments
c) καὶ ἐκάθισεν ἐπ' αὐτόν. and he sat on <u>it</u>	καὶ ἐπεκάθισεν ἐπάνω αὐτῶν. and he sat upon <u>them</u>

Like many others, this text fits well with the majority view that Mark is a source for Matthew rather than vice versa. On this understanding, Matthew has abandoned Mark's use of the historical present in favour of the aorist in a) and b), and he has preferred the arguably more eloquent verbs ἄγω and ἐπιτίθημι to Mark's φέρω and ἐπιβάλλω. Matthew has also omitted the unnecessary phrase πρὸς

²² Instone-Brewer, 'Two Asses', 97-98.

²³ While I am convinced of this line of argument, advocates of the 'multiple-garments' interpretation could perhaps appeal to the fact that only one of the animals is explicitly said to be tied in Matt. 21:2, i.e. in support of their thesis that Jesus sits on multiple garments on only one animal in Matt. 21:7. Two observations, however, may weaken the force of this observation. First, it may be presupposed that the colt is also tied. Secondly, on their reading Jesus sits only upon the colt, whereas the mother is the one who is tied here. Still, I think the argument retains some force.

τὸν Ἰησοῦν in a), and he has dropped the possessive αὐτῶν after garments in b).²⁴ Beyond this, Matthew has increased the parallelism of b) and c) in two ways, namely by using two ἐπι-verbs and by employing ἐπ' and ἐπάνω.²⁵ Finally, and most importantly for our purposes, he has expanded 'the colt' in Mark to 'the ass and the colt' in a), and he has *correspondingly* changed *both* the singular 'it' (αὐτῷ) to the plural 'them' (αὐτῶν) in b) *and* the singular 'it' (αὐτόν) to the plural 'them' (αὐτῶν) in c).

This interpretation of αὐτῶν in c), is, of course, subject to dispute, since it is also possible to argue that Matthew has introduced a more significant change here, namely from having Jesus sit on the colt (it) to having him sit on the garments (them). While this possibility should not be dismissed out of hand, the synoptic comparison raises two weighty arguments against the 'multiple-garments' interpretation. First, if Marcan priority is accepted, and we recognise that Matthew is working with Mark,²⁶ then it is much easier to conclude that just as Mark has Jesus sitting on the animal (it), so Matthew has Jesus sitting on the two animals (them) in c), i.e. that he has merely introduced a shift from the singular to the plural as he did in a) and b). Secondly, the likelihood that—like αὐτῷ/αὐτόν in Mark—αὐτῶν refers to 'the two animals' in both b) and c) is strengthened by the fact that Matthew has increased the parallelism between b) and c). To reiterate, while it is not

²⁴ Gundry, *Matthew*, 410, argues that this omission is significant and that in Matthew τὰ ἱμάτια refers to saddle clothes rather than to people's garments. This insightful suggestion is possible but by no means certain.

²⁵ Cf. W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Vol. 3; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997): 122. Plummer, *Matthew*, 286, suggests that the change of preposition from ἐπ' to ἐπάνω 'is perhaps intended to indicate a change of meaning', and adds 'there seems to be no example of ἐπάνω being used as riding on an animal; it would perhaps be as unusual as for us to talk of riding 'on top of' a horse'. While this argument is not without force, I am more impressed by the extent to which Matthew has increased the parallelism than by this point of difference.

²⁶ While my argument would be strengthened if it could be assumed that Matthew had a copy of Mark before him, I do not think that it depends on a particular understanding of the precise manner in which Matthew interacted with Mark. It would, *for example*, also apply if we were to assume that Matthew had an assistant who read to him from a scroll. In other words, my argument cannot be dismissed as an anachronistic imposition of modern practices of interacting with written texts. Rather, its force lies in the fact that Matthew can be seen to consistently change Mark's singular animal to his own plural animals throughout the chapter and within Matthew 21:7, an observation that is compatible with various explanations of the ways in which he interacted with Mark and other early Christian traditions. For a helpful discussion of the range of ways in which a given evangelist may have interacted with other gospels, see Andrew Lincoln, *The Gospel According to John* (New York: Hendrickson, 2005): 31-32.

impossible that he has introduced a more significant shift of emphasis in c), I think these observations make it *more likely* that Matthew speaks here of Jesus sitting on the two animals.

Finally, while I regard the synoptic comparison argument as substantial, an even stronger argument involves the relationship between Matthew 21:5 and 21:7. In particular, it seems to me that the ‘two-animal’ interpretation of Matthew 21:7 is strongly supported by the expression ‘mounted on an ass and on a colt’ in the citation of Zechariah 9:9 in Matthew 21:5.²⁷ As mentioned earlier, there is every reason to think that Matthew cites this Scripture as speaking of *two* animals, both because of the second ἐπί and because verse 7 explicitly states that ‘they brought the ass and the colt and they placed the garments on *them* (αὐτῶν)’. But once it is seen that the citation of Zechariah 9:9 in Matthew 21:5 looks forward to the two animals of 21:7, it is a very small step to conclude that it also looks forward to Matthew’s talk of Jesus sitting on two animals in 21:7. In other words, since Matthew 21:5 speaks of the king being ‘mounted on an ass and on a colt’, which Matthew interprets as two animals, and since Matthew is evidently concerned to underscore that Jesus precisely fulfils this Scripture, it follows that 21:7 very likely presents Jesus as *sitting* on two animals.

I recognise that this argument carries especially great weight with scholars who adopt the ‘history conformed to Scripture’ interpretation that I defended above, for they already understand Matthew to be conforming his narrative to the Scripture. However, I think it should also carry considerable weight with advocates of the ‘Scripture conformed to history’ interpretation, since they too reckon with Matthew’s concern to have the Scripture and the narrative echo each other.

The preceding line of thought represents the central contention of this article, namely that a close comparison of Mark 11 and Matthew 21 in conjunction with an examination of the relation between Matthew 21:5 and 21:7 strongly suggests that Matthew 21:7 *speaks of* Jesus sitting on two animals rather than on multiple garments upon a single animal. I now regard this conclusion as ‘probable’, perhaps even ‘highly probable’. The situation, however, is very different when we turn to the question of what exactly, if anything, Matthew may have

²⁷ Cf. e.g. Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 122.

envisaged or had in mind when he spoke of Jesus sitting on two animals.²⁸

The importance of this distinction is twofold. First, it is crucial to make this distinction because the two questions cannot, in my judgment, be answered with a comparable degree of certainty. In short, while I am convinced—at least for now—that it is ‘probable’, perhaps even ‘highly probable’,²⁹ that Matthew intends *to speak* of Jesus as sitting on two animals, I think that it is only possible, unless new sources are identified that shed further light on the topic, to formulate very tentative hypotheses with regard to the question of what, if anything, Matthew may have envisaged or had in mind. Accordingly, it is methodologically problematic when Gundry rejects the ‘two-animal’ interpretation on the grounds that it is doubtful that Matthew intends his readers to visualise ‘a trick rider balancing himself on two animals at the same time’,³⁰ since for this argument to work one must first show that *this answer* to the question of what Matthew may have *envisaged* is sufficiently probable to play a determinative role in answering the question of whether or not Matthew *speaks of* Jesus as sitting on two animals. Moreover, even if Gundry were correct, which is by no means certain, in assuming that the ‘two-animal’ interpretation of Matthew 21:7 must involve visualising Jesus ‘balancing himself on two animals at the same time’, it would still have to be shown that this image would have evoked comparable associations in the minds of ancient readers as it does for some (twenty-first century, urban) readers today (e.g. trick

²⁸ I wish to thank the anonymous reviewers of an earlier version of this article for sharpening my awareness of the need to make a clear distinction between these two questions.

²⁹ The reason that I am inclined to regard it as ‘highly probable’ is because I consider the arguments from the comparison with Mark to be ‘strong’ and the argument from the correspondence between Matt. 21:5 and 21:7 to be ‘very strong’. The reason that I am ultimately inclined to regard it as ‘probable’ and hesitant to describe it as ‘highly probable’ is because I acknowledge that certain textual features can be understood to support the ‘multiple-garments’ interpretation, namely a) the fact that ‘the nearest antecedent for the final ‘them’ is ‘garments’ (Blomberg, ‘Matthew’, 64-65), b) the change in preposition from ἐπὶ to ἐπ’άνω in Matt. 21:7bc, which could suggest a change of meaning for the repeated αὐτῶν (Plummer, *Matthew*, 286), and c) the fact that only one of the animals is explicitly said to be tied in Matt. 21:2, which could be taken as an analogy for the thesis that Jesus is only assumed to be sitting on one animal in Matt. 21:7 (see n. 23 above). My purpose in ‘grading’ my various conclusions throughout this article is not to advocate a ‘clinical’ approach to interpretation, but merely to indicate to the reader where I think the strongest arguments lie and where I recognise that my line of thought is particularly tentative or speculative.

³⁰ Gundry, *Matthew*, 410.

rider, circus, ridiculous, etc.) for it to play a decisive role in challenging the plausibility of the ‘two-animal’ reading of Matthew 21:7.

For the purposes of this article, I wish to leave open the question of what, if anything, Matthew may have envisaged in speaking of Jesus sitting on two animals. For my argument, the key point is that an acknowledgement of uncertainty on this question does not necessarily reduce, let alone undermine the probability of the ‘two-animal’ interpretation of Matthew 21:7.

4. The Surprising Outcome of Matthew’s Interaction with Scripture

If the ‘two-animal’ interpretation of Matthew 21:7 is accepted as the most likely reading, as I have argued, then it remains to ask how current readers and hearers might think about the surprising outcome of Matthew’s interaction with Scripture. As the unusual passage is delved into, it opens up onto weighty questions concerning the connections between Scripture and history, between hope and fulfilment, and how authors choose to make those connections come alive. If Matthew chose to echo and amplify Scripture in his depictions, this seems to be his way of taking scriptural hopes seriously and making them quite concrete.

In section 2 of my article, I argued that the explanation for Matthew’s two animals primarily lies in his exegetical practice, i.e. in his word-for-word reading of Zechariah 9:9. Without retracting this argument, it may be worth asking whether Matthew’s use of the unusual image of Jesus mounted on two animals may *also* represent and perhaps be *partially* motivated by an attempt at impressing the scenario vividly on the minds of his hearers/readers.³¹ Indeed, Gundry could be on the right track with his suggestion that Matthew has fashioned a ‘wide throne’ for Jesus, which serves to ‘play up Jesus’ royal majesty’.³² While Gundry’s ‘wide throne’, is composed of multiple garments draped over the two animals, with Jesus sitting on only one animal, it seems to me that speaking of Jesus sitting on two animals only strengthens the unusual and majestic aspect of the situation. In other words, if Matthew has the king in Zechariah 9:9 and

³¹ Cf. the quotation from Keener in n. 12 above.

³² Gundry, *Matthew*, 410.

Jesus in Matthew 21:7 mounted and sitting on two animals, he may be posing the question in Jerusalem in a visually striking way: ‘Who is this?’ At the same time, the image itself, in its amplified version of Zechariah’s oracle, gives the answer.

In my judgment, this suggestive reading of the text represents a plausible development of a motif that is certainly emphasised in the text, namely the evangelist’s clear intention to present Jesus as king (21:5). I think it resonates well with the overall thrust of Matthew’s argument. At the same time, it must be conceded that the suggestion that Matthew himself intended to accentuate the motif of Jesus as king by including the two animals must remain tentative. In other words, I regard this aspect of my reading as merely ‘conceivable’ or ‘possible’ rather than ‘probable’ or ‘highly probable’.

5. Conclusion

In attempting to draw out the main contributions of this article, the interpretation proposed in the last section will be left to the side as especially tentative in nature. Instead, I wish to focus on the four main ways in which I have attempted to advance the discussion. These may be summarised as follows.

In contrast to the strong rhetoric that has often characterised the discussion of the significance of the two animals in Matthew, I have sought to provide a *non-polemical account* of two well-argued traditions of interpretation, which I have designated as the ‘Scripture conformed to history’ interpretation and the ‘history conformed to Scripture interpretation’. This non-polemical approach, in turn, has given rise to two noteworthy observations. First, rather than being restricted to ‘evangelical’ scholars, the ‘Scripture conformed to history’ interpretation is also advocated, in modified form, by ‘non-evangelical’ scholars such as Krister Stendahl and Barnabas Lindars. In my view, this observation alone should caution scholars of all persuasions from unhelpfully treating this question as one that neatly falls across ‘party lines’ and from falling in line accordingly. Secondly, the ‘history conformed to Scripture’ interpretation may not be summarily dismissed with the caricaturing suggestion that it unconvincingly attributes the doubling of the animals to a *Gentile misunderstanding* of Hebrew parallelism in Zechariah 9:9, since advocates of *both* traditions of

interpretation are free to attribute this doubling to a *Jewish* exegetical tendency to make every word count, while maintaining that Matthew (probably) knew what he was doing. The significance of undercutting this oversimplifying line of thought³³ is that it enables advocates of both interpretations to focus on the true points of difference between them in conjunction with the arguments advanced in their favour.

In addition to providing a synthesis of the two traditions of interpretation, I have presented a fresh argument for the probability of the 'history conformed to Scripture' interpretation with reference to (1) the mention of only one animal in the other Gospels, (2) Matthew's tendency to double entities elsewhere, (3) the plausibility of explaining the doubling with reference to Matthew's scriptural exegesis, and 4) Matthew's documented interest in the literal word-for-word fulfilment of biblical material elsewhere (see Matt. 4:13, 15; 22:7; 27:9-10).

In my judgement, the main contribution of this article, however, lies in my attempt to show that the 'two-animal' interpretation is *more probable* than the 'multiple-garments' interpretation of Matthew 21:7. In support of this position I have appealed to (1) the results of a broad comparison of Mark 11 and Matthew 21, which suggest that 'Matthew wanted to include both animals in every respect of the event, including the act of being ridden',³⁴ (2) the results of a close comparison of Mark 11:7abc and Matthew 21:7abc, which suggest that in each verse segment Matthew has changed Mark's *singular animal* (a: 'the colt', b: 'it', c: 'it') to his own *plural animals* (a: 'the ass and the colt', b: 'them', c: 'them'), a reading that is strengthened by the fact that Matthew has increased the parallelism between 21:7b and 21:7c, and (3) the decisive observation that Matthew's talk of Jesus *sitting on the ass and the colt* mentioned in 21:7a (them in 21:7c) underscores that

³³ Lest I fall victim to the opposite oversimplification, I wish to point out again that some advocates of the 'history conformed to Scripture' *do* ascribe the doubling to a Gentile misunderstanding. See n. 8 above. My point is merely that this tradition of interpretation does not *require* this assumption. Hence, it cannot be summarily rejected by calling these assumptions in question, namely a) that the doubling must have been carried out by a Gentile, and b) that the author must have been unaware of the original force of the synonymous parallelism in Zech. 9:9. I regard the first assumption as very unlikely. While the second is more difficult to assess, I think it is slightly more likely that Matthew knew what he was doing, i.e. that he was aware of the original force of the synonymous parallelism in Zech. 9:9 but nevertheless chose to exploit the potential of reading the text in a word-for-word manner as a way of showing that Jesus fulfilled Scripture to a tee (cf. esp. John 19:23-24 and n. 9 above).

³⁴ Instone-Brewer, 'Two Asses', 97-98.

Jesus precisely fulfils the Scripture quoted in 21:5, which has Jesus '*mounted on an ass and on a colt*', whereas the reading that has him sitting on multiple garments on a single animal does not.

Finally, while stridently arguing for the probability of the 'two-animal' interpretation of Matthew 21:7 (the main contention of this article), I have also stressed the need to distinguish the question of whether or not Matthew intends *to speak* of Jesus sitting on two animals from the much more difficult question of what, if anything, Matthew may have *envisaged* when he spoke in this way.