

GENTILES OF STONE

If these walls could talk

THE HOUR HAD COME. JESUS set his face toward Jerusalem. When he had traveled near Bethpage and came to the Mount of Olives, he received a word of knowledge about an untamed colt. He sent two of his disciples to get it for him: “Go into the village ahead of you, and when you get there you’ll see a colt tied there that has never been ridden before. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks, tell him, ‘The Lord has need of it.’”

They found it all just as he said. It would serve to fulfill Zechariah’s ancient prophecy.

*Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem!
Lo, your king comes to you;
triumphant and victorious is he,
humble and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.*

When they brought the colt to Jesus, they threw their cloaks on it, and helped him up. The whole multitude of disciples started spreading their cloaks out on the road before him and shouting praises to God as he made his way down the path from the Mount of Olives. They joyously shouted,

*Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!
Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!*

But there were Pharisees in the crowd. Hearing the praises, they ran up to Jesus, saying, “Teacher! Teacher!

Tell your disciples to stop!”

“If these were silent, the rocks would cry out,” he replied.

Rocks crying out? Everything seemed to be going as the scriptures foretold. Jesus set himself to enter Jerusalem; he received a word about the untamed colt; his disciples were crowning him as king of Israel; and then he says—what?! Rocks would cry out?? Did Luke get this right? Is that really what he said? What on earth was he talking about?

I’ve been a Full Gospel believer for more than thirty years and have heard dozens of sermons on this queer statement. Every one I’ve heard has interpreted Jesus’ “rocks” as the literal stones under the Pharisees’ feet. (“You know, Israel is full of these big rocks. They’re everywhere.”) This has led to all kinds of speculation as to how rocks shrieking could actually come to pass and why the Pharisees shouldn’t have just blown it off as the inane retort of a silly, vagabond preacher thinking he was hot stuff by riding into town on a donkey.

Some preachers have resorted to Matthew’s account of the resurrection for support.

Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and gave over his spirit. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split.

Others have turned to Mark’s Gospel.

For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.

Rocks splitting and earthquakes have been thrown around as fulfillment of Jesus' words. But these tortured interpretations sound more like a Star Trek episode than they do the Gospel of the kingdom.

Kirk: Spock, what is it?

Spock: Captain, my sensors indicate that the musical sounds aren't coming from carbon-based creatures at all.

Kirk: Spock, what are you saying?

Spock: Captain, the sensors have deduced that these musical melodies are coming from the very rocks under our feet.

Kirk: My God, man! What does that mean?

Spock: Captain, the sounds we hear from these seemingly inanimate objects appear to be associated with an ancient figure riding on a donkey.

Kirk: Scotty, beam us outta here, will ya!?!

But what if Jesus wasn't speaking literally here? He was responding to some hot-headed Pharisees, men he knew were intimately familiar with Israel's holy writings. What if, instead of conjuring up some fantastic story, he was telegraphing a message using their very own scriptures against them?

The first time we hear of rocks crying out isn't in Luke's Gospel, but in the screed of a little-known prophet named Habakkuk, who lived sometime in the late seventh century BCE, at the height of Babylonian power. His little book of prophecy is important to us because he prophesied about a coming Righteous One who would bring salvation through the means of his own faithfulness.

Then the LORD answered me and said:

Write the vision;

make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it.

For there is still a vision for the appointed time;

it speaks of the end, and does not lie.

If it seems to tarry, wait for it;

it will surely come, it will not delay.

Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them,

but the Righteous One shall live by his faithfulness.

Paul launches his famous epistle of Romans with this prophecy.

For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith unto faith; as it is written, "The Righteous One shall live by faith."

He also uses it as a major springboard in Galatians.

Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law; for "The Righteous One shall live by faith."

What is significant is that Habakkuk's prophecy not only foresees the Righteous One, but it also lays out a diatribe against the "selfish" and "proud." Here is where we're introduced to the metaphor of screaming stones.

*Alas for you who get evil gain for your houses,
setting your nest on high to be safe
from the reach of harm!
You have devised shame for your house
by cutting off many peoples;
you have forfeited your life.
The very stones will cry out from the wall,
and the plaster will respond from the woodwork.*

Habakkuk shouts out to the smug owner of the "nest on high," telling him that he's barrelling toward judgment because he's closed himself off to "many peoples." The very stones of his house will cry out against this injustice, he says.

If you scuttle over to your local seminary and pull all the dusty commentaries on Habakkuk off the shelves, they'll tell you that Habakkuk's prophecy was all about the greed for material stuff. But is this really who Habakkuk had in mind? Some rich homeowners closeted in their gated communities with Cadillacs in their driveways? Maybe it was. But just a few lines down from this scathing rebuke he writes that "the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the LORD" in spite of this naked possessiveness. The better reading is that he was sending a rebuke to God's own people who coveted their chosen status to the exclusion of others. They brought shame to their house by locking out everyone else from the Gospel house. Judgment was now on the horizon because of this.

Ezekiel, a better known prophet, was a contemporary of Habakkuk. He used the metaphor of stones, too, when he prophesied about the new covenant.

I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them; I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, so that they may follow

You have devised shame for your house by cutting off many peoples; you have forfeited your life.

my statutes and keep my ordinances and obey them. Then they shall be my people, and I will be their God.

Hearts of stone. Hearts of flesh. His prophecy seems pretty straightforward this side of the resurrection. Where it gets interesting is on the banks of the Jordan River. There, John is baptizing people in the river when he spies some Pharisees and Sadducees coming down to scrutinize him. Tearing out of the water, he gives them no quarter.

You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, “We have Abraham as our ancestor”; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

He dresses them down for their self-satisfied smugness—that there isn’t any need of repentance because they are Jews, saved because of their lineage to Abraham. “Ha!” John says. Judgment is at the door, and if they don’t repent then God is going to chop down their tree into itty-bitty pieces. After all, God can raise these “stones”—God-fearing Gentiles that had come to be baptized—to be Abraham’s children. God wasn’t about to let the Jews corner the Gospel; “the whole earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of God” with or without them.

When the Pharisees told Jesus to make his disciples stop, Jesus didn’t tell the Pharisees that the rocks they were standing on were about to burst out in song. No, he was warning them that if he didn’t receive praise from the Jews, then the Gentiles would cry out with praises to God.

The Gospels confirm this is exactly what happened. The multitude’s praises turned to cries of “Crucify!” just days later and the Jews handed their Christ over to be crucified as a curse on the cross.

When a man is convicted of a crime punishable by death and is executed, and you hang him on a tree, his corpse must not remain all night upon the tree; you shall bury him that same day, for anyone hung on a tree is under God’s curse. You must not defile the land that the LORD your God is giving you for possession.

Paul writes that the scriptures foreknew that judgment would come to the house of Israel (Habakkuk, take a bow) and that the Gentiles would become the children of Abraham through the means of the resurrection.

Just as Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness, so, you see, those who believe are the seed of Abraham. And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, declared the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “All the Gentiles shall be blessed in you.” For this reason, those who believe are blessed with Abraham who believed.

Now, instead of the walls crying out against the injustice of a cornered Gospel, they comprise a living temple, offering up spiritual sacrifices, that is, praises to God.

Like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

The hard truth about Jesus’ donkey ride is that Israel was well aware of Habakkuk’s *you have forfeited your life* and it didn’t make any difference to them. **b**