

Reality, Language, and Reality Blockers

by Aurel Ionica

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It is widely recognized that even the most *objective* interpretation of a text is based on some underlying assumptions which are rarely acknowledged, let alone discussed. Among these, I will argue that the most important one is how reality is understood. To be more precise, it is assumed that modern scholars have a sound understanding of reality — both in terms of what it is and how to describe it — while ancient people had a naive understanding of reality, usually referred to as *mythical thinking*. As a result, ancient texts are virtually unintelligible to modern readers therefore modern scholars see their task to *translate* them into modern categories. That ancient writers may have had a better and more accurate understanding of reality compared to which modern scholarly understanding seems simplistic or even narrow minded probably no serious scholar would consider. The following studies take seriously the possibility of such a ridiculous idea. In order to compare the way in which reality was understood by ancient people and the way in which it is understood by modern scholars I will resort to some ancient texts as well as modern interpretations of them.

Reality has to do with what *exists* and is conveyed by the verb *to be*. Because reality is such a fundamental and universal concept, this verb is probably the most pervasive word in all languages. Being so common, its meaning seems self-evident: *to be* or *to exist* means to be out there as an object of investigation for everyone to perceive. This form of existence is often referred to as *objective existence*, and is used to distinguish the objects that exist out there in reality and not just in the imagination of some subject that are not available to everyone to perceive. Because of its independence of any subject, *objective reality* has received special attention from philosophical reflection as a result of its epistemological function: it has the potential to provide knowledge about the world that can be verified and therefore can be universally accepted as normative. It is widely believed that the concept of *objective reality* has laid the foundation for scientific research, the only reality that science recognizes and is able to investigate.

In dealing with events of the past, however, the concept of objective reality no longer uses the word *is* but rather *was*, or *happened*. Again, to distinguish things that were out there or happened out there for everyone to see from those which were just imagined, the objective reality resorts to the qualifier *really*: *really was*, or *really happened*. This distinction is important because only events that actually belong to objective reality properly qualify to provide reliable and valid historical knowledge.

The concept of objective reality without a doubt has a tremendous epistemological significance and there is no surprise that for a long time it seemed the only form of reality that can properly be identified as such, indeed, that can be properly conceived. The existence of the *object*, however, is not the only form of existence possible or important. Another form of existence is that of the *subject*, that is, of the one who is aware of the existence of things as objects of investigation. While subjects share the same kind of objective existence with the objects of their investigation in the sense of being objects of investigation of other subjects—including themselves—their existence is different from the existence of the objects of their investigation in an important way. While the existence of objects which *are out there* can be viewed as fixed because they have no control over whether they exist or not or whether they are the way they are and not different—indeed, not even being aware that they exist at all—the existence of a subject who is aware of its own existence is something open. What I am is different from the way in which the chair on which I am sitting is because my existence is not fixed. The chair can only be what it is and if it becomes something else is because other outside factors have caused the chair to turn into something else. Although it is true that human existence can be modified by external agents just as the existence of a chair can, for human existence the human subject is *usually* also a deciding agent. I say *usually* and not *always* because sometimes humans allow their existence to be completely shaped by outside factors without their own input so that it becomes very similar to that of an object, and when that happens, that existence is no longer an *authentic* subject existence, as Kierkegaard would say. What I am right now and what I am doing right now is the result of many choices which I have made over a long period of time as well as decisions taken by others, including factors that were beyond my control. Moreover, while the chair on which I am sitting right now can only be what it is, I could be something very different from what I am right now if I want to. What makes human existence *real* or *authentic* is precisely the potential of being something else. The ability of the subjects not only to be aware of the existence of other objects but also of the extent of the unfulfilled potentiality of their own existence makes their existence special and different from any other object.

Once the existence of the subject is recognized, another form of existence for the object can be identified. While the objective existence defines the existence of an object independent of any subject, the same existence can be very different when viewed from the point of view of a certain subject or of a category of subjects. This kind of existence or

reality which is created or decided by subjects has escaped philosophical reflection and as a result is alien to modern thinking; therefore, I will label it at this point *reasoned* reality. In other words, to some extent objects are not what they are *in themselves*, but what subjects *decide* or have a *reason* for their existence. Subjects are able to create such a reality as a result of their ability to think or reason and communicate what they think through language. Because the reasoned reality is accomplished by the subjects through language, the study of this kind of reality needs to be done also in language and not necessarily how objects are in the world.

In order to illustrate that the reasoned reality is both real and different from the objective reality I would like to use the notion of *real estate*. As its name implies, real estate refers to values which are objectively out there and *real* so that anyone can see and evaluate. That the value of real estate is something objective seems to be proved by the fact that various professional evaluators would assign surprisingly similar value to the same piece of property although the evaluation is done independently. In spite of this, the value of real estate is not as *real* and as *objective* as it may seem. If one compares two pieces of property—identical from all points of view—but one from a *good* or rich neighborhood and one from a *poor* one, the values of the two pieces of property would be substantially different regardless of how many evaluators calculate the value of the estate. Similarly, if one decides to build two houses using the same contractor, identical blueprints, identical materials, and on identical lots, but one in a good neighborhood and one in a poor one, the two apparently identical houses would have substantially different values no matter how many evaluators do the evaluation. In a sense, things are not what they are *in themselves*, but what humans want them to be. Strange as it may seem, if enough people agree that the value of a discarded piece of paper or a used piece of underwear is worth millions of dollars, it will sell for that amount. What enables us to place extreme value on some objects and consider others to be worthless is our ability through language to agree on what is important.

Without denying that the difference between modernism and postmodernism involves quite different methodological procedures, I will argue that the major change has happened in the way reality is understood, and therefore when the text is analyzed from that perspective, the methodological procedures specific to modern and postmodern scholarship not only are better clarified, but they no longer appear as unrelated and mutually exclusive. Moreover, the concept of reality allows for insights into the meaning of the text which is not available in any current method of interpretation. In order to illustrate this, I will look at the story found in Genesis 22:1-19 about the sacrifice of Isaac from both the historical critical and from the postmodernist perspectives.

The story about Abraham's attempt to sacrifice his son Isaac belongs to a larger circle of stories about the patriarchs. From the historical-critical perspective such stories are notoriously difficult because their historicity is virtually impossible to establish as a result of the distance in time between the time when they were written down and when the related events are supposed to have happened. Even if one assumes that Genesis was written down by Moses who lived at the time when the Bible claims that he lived, there would still be hundreds of years between when Abraham supposedly attempted to sacrifice his son and when the story was written down for the first time. From the historical-critical perspective, to establish what *really happened* by using this story is quite a formidable task. The accuracy of the text is further undermined by the inconsistency in using the divine names. For instance, in the first part of the story God is referred to as *Elohim*, while in the end of the story God is referred to as *Yahweh*. Because of this inconsistency scholars have concluded that the story is a composite of materials coming from two sources: one from an Elohist source—usually referred to as the E source—and one from an Yahwist source—usually referred to as J from Jahweh and considered to be earlier than E. Because the story is assumed to come from the Elohist source, we have a strange situation in which in a later story material from an earlier source is interpolated. Comments like the following are typical for Bible commentaries: “The story, except for vv. 15-18 and a few minor additions, is from E. It is one of the most beautifully told and most moving of the stories in Genesis, and indicates that E, at his best, is artistically on a level with J².”¹ Because the story is so distant from the events it purports to relate, it does not refer necessarily to the people it describes, indeed, even the places it mentions: “If the legend be very ancient, there is no certainty that the place was in the Holy Land at all. Any extensive mountainous region, well known at the time, and with a lingering tradition of human sacrifice, would satisfy the conditions.”² As far as the reality behind the story is concerned, this is what a historical-critical scholar would speculate: “The primary intent of the tale was presumably to explain why it was that human sacrifice was no longer offered at the sanctuary at which it was told. In E it has a deeper significance: human sacrifice has no place in the worship of the Lord the God of Israel.”³ Gunkel makes the interesting suggestion that the reality behind the patriarchal narrative is later than the reality behind the Jephthah's narrative which, as one may remember, occurs during the time of judges: “Accordingly, the Jephthah narrative is harsher and more ancient, Gen 22 softer and more modern. Indeed, the narrator knows that, in the final analysis, God does not desire this sacrifice. But the legend still reckons with the

¹ George Arthur Buttrick et al., eds., *The Interpreter's Bible: The Holy Scriptures in the King James and Revised Standard Versions with General Articles and Introduction, Exegesis, Exposition for Each Book of the Bible*, 7 vols., (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1952), 1:642.

² John Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1930), 329.

³ Buttrick, 1:645.

possibility that God could require it.”⁴ Because of the nature of the sources, the recovery of the reality behind most of the biblical narratives is a virtually hopeless enterprise.

While postmodernist scholars would not deny that the biblical narratives are distant in time from the events they are supposed to relate, they are not interested in recovering the reality behind the text as the historical-critical scholars do, but rather they want to deal with the text as it is. Because they insist on analyzing the text as it has come down to us, such approaches are usually referred to as *literary approaches*. The term is unfortunate because it obscures the fact that stories still have to do with *reality* and not necessarily with fiction as the word *literary* may suggest. Often postmodernist interpreters ignore or seem not even to be aware that the text creates a reality of its own which can be quite different from the way things *really* happened or usually happen. Indeed, sometimes the interpreter assumes the reality of the reader—which is variously called context, social location, and so on—as the reality against which the text is interpreted, making the reality within the text virtually irrelevant. This reality of the reader I would call *reality in front of the text* because the reader, as the one who decides the meaning of the text based on modern beliefs according to the postmodernist position, is on the *opposite* side of the text than the historical events that are *behind* the text since any text is later than the events described. While borrowing concepts and procedures developed by literary approaches, my goal is not to illustrate such procedures—the reader’s familiarity with them is assumed—but rather to point out how reality is constructed in the text.

The story begins: “After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, ‘Abraham!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’ He said, ‘Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you’” (Gen 22:1-2).⁵ The story is not told either by God or by Abraham, but by what scholars refer to as the *narrator*. Typically, narrators never introduce themselves and although narrators must have been real persons, they differ from real persons in some respects. In our case, the narrator seems to know what no person in real life would ever be able to: What God tells Abraham apparently in a dream and that God has some kind of test in mind. Narrators which claim to know what no one ever can are usually referred to as *omniscient narrators*. This is, however, a misnomer. Although narrators may claim to know what no one else can, it does not mean that they know everything. While they may be quite knowledgeable in some respects, in others they are quite ignorant. For instance, although our narrator knows what God tells Abraham and is able to read God’s mind, the narrator does not seem to know what the

⁴ Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis*, trans. Mark E. Biddle, foreword Ernest W. Nicholson (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1997), 237.

⁵ All Bible quotations are from *New Revised Standard Version of the Bible Online* unless otherwise indicated: <http://www.devotions.net/bible/00bible.htm>.

test is supposed to be. Is God testing Abraham to see whether he would find the idea of sacrificing his son repulsive and pass the test by becoming indignant and refuse to comply, or is Abraham expected to try to bring the requested sacrifice and pass the test in this way? Our narrator does not give us any clue about what the test is and does not seem to have any. Similarly, another aspect about which narrators are notoriously ignorant is how their own story ends. Our narrator provides us with no clue as to how the story ends and has to wait like any of us for the end of the story in order to find out. Regardless of whether God actually talked to Abraham or not, what the beginning of the story tells us is not what can happen in the real world but rather what happens quite often in the world of stories.

Then the narrator continues: “So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away” (Gen 22:3–4). This description seems to be as life-like as one can get taking into account the kind of culture in which Abraham is supposed to have lived and commentators are quick to point out the factuality of such details:

Each successive moment in that seemingly interminable interval of time is charged with drama that is all the more intense for not being spelled out: the saddling of the pack animal; the unarticulated orders to the servants; the splitting of the wood for the sacrificial fire; the long, wordless trip to the spot from which the chosen site can first be seen; the forced matter-of-factness of Abraham’s parting instructions to the attendants.⁶

At closer examination, however, what this part of the story seems to lack is precisely that “matter-of-factness.” First, we are told that Abraham saddled the donkey and in real life that action can only mean that someone is expected to ride the donkey. Although there are four travelers, we have no idea for whom the saddle is intended. Even if we rule out the two slaves, we are still left with two candidates: Abraham and Isaac. Moreover, it would seem that Isaac is not the best candidate because later on he takes over the burden of the donkey. Although Abraham remains the best candidate to ride the donkey—particularly taking into account his old age—the text makes clear that he did not ride but rather “walked” (וַיֵּלֶךְ אֶל-הַמִּקְוָם). Not only do we not know who is supposed to ride the donkey, but even if someone had wanted to, that could have hardly been possible. We learn from the story that later on the load of firewood was transferred onto Isaac’s back, which would imply that during the three-day journey the load must have been carried by the donkey, which would have left virtually no room for any potential rider. Moreover, in real life a saddle may be an appropriate means to accommodate a rider on a donkey but not a load of firewood large enough to burn a human being. Another *fact*

⁶ E. A. Speiser, *Genesis*, 2nd ed., The Anchor Bible 1 (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1978), 164.

mentioned in the story is that Abraham cut the firewood and that may seem quite easy to understand, but not really easy for Abraham to do. According to the larger story, Abraham was about one hundred years old when Isaac was born, and taking into account that Isaac is strong enough to carry a sizable load of wood uphill on his back, we may conclude that he must have been at least in his late teens at this time, if not past forty as some commentators suppose. If that is the case, according to the narrative Abraham must be at least 120 years old if not past 140. For such an old man to be able to cut a sizable load of dry wood with a bronze ax would have been quite a task in real life even if he had had a chain saw. Further, we are told that Abraham took with him two of his slaves which again seems quite life-like taking into account that the story takes place at a time when slavery was quite common. But again, while in real life it was the slaves who did the hard work of cutting wood and loading donkeys, in the narrative it is Abraham who is doing the hard work while his “young” helpers (יְהָרְיִי) are busy watching. According to what they do in narratives, scholars have identified various categories of characters: main characters, secondary characters, helpers, and so on. Although slaves in real life help in some way, in our story they have done nothing except probably watch Abraham sweat and run out of breath. As if realizing that we are puzzled by why these slaves are in the story anyway, the narrator continues: “Then Abraham said to his young men, ‘Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you’” (v. 5). Finally, the two slaves get something to do: nothing. Abraham had spared these slaves of their hard work because they had a very important job to do: to keep the donkey company. The reason the donkey needed company is explained in the next verse: “Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. So, the two of them walked on together” (v. 6). Consequently, the slaves were necessary because the donkey was going to be left behind. Fortunately, we are no longer puzzled by the presence of the slaves in the story, but now we are even more puzzled by the saddled donkey that no one has ridden anyway. In real life carrying loads uphill was almost exclusively done by donkeys for which they seemed perfectly fit, but in our story the donkey is discharged of its duty precisely when a donkey was needed and helpful most and its job taken over by Isaac although there was nothing wrong with the donkey while humans were notoriously unfit for such jobs. For humans to carry loads uphill while donkeys were available defied anything one knew about how things happened in real life. If the slaves and the donkey were intended to be helpers, they clearly do not help much. Therefore, I would call them *dummy characters*.

After leaving behind the dummy characters, we learn that Isaac was not really dumb: “Isaac said to his father Abraham, ‘Father!’ And he said, ‘Here I am, my son.’ He said, ‘The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?’ Abraham said, ‘God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.’ So, the two of them

walked on together” (vv. 7-8). Again, that seems like conversation between two persons who are quite in touch with reality when doing something deadly serious, but something is again un-life-like. For Isaac to embark on such a long journey and not raise any questions about the purpose of the journey for such a long time and in spite of such obvious clues is quite unreal. What is even stranger is that Abraham—the initiator of the whole enterprise—does not claim to have a clear understanding of how things will develop and admits his ignorance as well. Although he does say that God “will provide” and that turns out to be true, he seems so surprised that what he had said proved to be true that he decided to use the phrase as a toponym (v. 14) which shows that at the time when he spoke he had no idea how things would turn out. Although people may end up doing something else than what they had planned, for Abraham and Isaac to embark on such a long journey when so much was at stake hoping to find out how things may turn out is not how people normally act in real life. In this story not only do we have *helping* characters which do not do what in real life they are supposed to, but even the main characters do not act like real people either.

Having reached this point, we need to address the obvious question: Why would an omniscient narrator write such a weird story? Why not forget about the slaves and the donkey and have Isaac carry the wood all the way to emphasize better his ordeal? Since Abraham had to explain to Isaac that he was the sacrifice when he placed him on the altar, why not provide that explanation to Isaac right from the beginning or at least as soon as Isaac asked the question in order to better emphasize Isaac’s acceptance to be sacrificed after having pondered over the question for three days or at least for some time?

It is only when we look at reality as it is constructed in the text and at how it departs from the reality as we know it that we are in the position to ask the proper questions about the meaning of the story. Of course, the narrator could have simplified the story and made it more life-like, but the way in which the story departs from real life provides important clues about the message. By constructing the story in this way, the narrator tells us that Abraham did not do what he did because he did not have other options, but because he chose to do so. First, Abraham could have flatly rejected God’s request arguing that human sacrifices were an abomination and in his case, it would have made God’s promise to him impossible to be fulfilled. Or, he could have complied with the request, but carry it out in ways that would have spared him of unnecessary pain. As the story makes clear, he owned slaves and therefore he had the option of commissioning two of them to carry out the sacrifice for him while he could have stayed home and be spared of the ordeal just as he commissioned one of his slaves later on to find a wife for the same Isaac (Gen 24). After all, God had not insisted that the sacrifice could not have been performed by someone else. Although he could have delegated the job, he did not. Further, although he had slaves who could have done the hard work of cutting the wood and making all

the preparations for the journey, he refused to take any shortcuts and chose to do even what God had not asked for and he was not supposed to. Similarly, he had the option to have the donkey carry the wood all the way to the place of sacrifice, but he decided to have Isaac carry the wood himself in order to point out that Isaac himself had the option of making his ordeal easier, but did not want to use that option either. And finally, Abraham was willing to take the hard road while having quite a vague idea about what God was up to instead of using God's vagueness and his ignorance as an excuse to reject the request altogether.

And now we come to the issue of reality: Did it really happen? Did it really happen that Abraham was not only willing to do something painful, but to do it the hard way? Did it really happen that as a result of his religious belief, he not only was willing to give up something very dear to him, but to do it in the most painful way? Of course, it did! Not only it did happen, but probably happened more than once. Not only it did happen to Abraham, but it happened to many others as well. Such things happened not only in the reality of the story, but they happen in the real world anywhere and all the time. And this is where the difference between historical reality and created reality becomes important: while historical reality deals with what happens once, created reality deals with what can happen all the time. While historical reality deals with what humans have little control over, created reality has to do with what human *choose* to do. In order to understand this, one needs to look neither at the reality *behind* the text, nor *at* the text, but rather at the reality *within* the text. That the dummy characters were present in the story only to emphasize Abraham's choices which he did not use is proved by the way the story ends: "So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beer-sheba; and Abraham lived at Beer-sheba" (v. 19). Although the donkey is no longer crowded with the wood and is fitted with a saddle, it is simply discarded and Abraham and his company preferred to "walk" together (וַיֵּלְכוּ) rather than ride the donkey, possibly by turns. According to how the story ends, the slaves are retrieved on the way back home but the donkey is left behind possibly still waiting to be claimed.

Or is it? Could it be that a story is not over when it is over? Most scholars see stories as self-contained units without much connection with one another except possibly in terms of similarity of plot. The concept of reality within a story enables us to compare the reality within one story with the reality within another story and determine to what extent stories share the same reality in spite of the linguistic or even religious differences just as the concept of objective reality allows for different individuals to share the same room in spite of the fact that they may wear different clothes, speak different languages, vote for a different party, and worship different shrines. The bold question we should dare to ask is: Could it be that the same reality which is found in the Abraham story we might find somewhere else?

Intrigued by this question I would like to turn to another story written in a different language, from a different religion, and quite distant in time from the Abraham's story and I admit that the starting clue in my inquiry has been the abandoned donkey. The story in reality is four stories because it is found in all four Gospels: Matt 21:1-11; Mark 11:1-10; Luke 19:28-38; John 12:12-19. According to the historical critical thinking, such a wide attestation of a story with just minor differences as far as details are concerned is a strong indication of its historicity and therefore that it *really* happened. All four stories are placed at the beginning of what is known as the Passion Narrative: the larger story that deals with Jesus' final journey to Jerusalem that culminated with his crucifixion. Why would all four gospel writers include such an insignificant detail as Jesus' riding of a donkey when he entered Jerusalem on his last journey if that is not a piece of historical detail which was faithfully preserved by the tradition and accurately remembered? Although there are important differences among the stories as I will point out, the consistent presence of the story in all four gospels points out to its historicity.

Although John's Gospel is not the shortest, his version of the story is: "Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it" (12:14). The fact that Jesus found the donkey presupposes that someone must have lost it and to raise the question of whose donkey it must have been would probably be the most hopeless question one could ask from the historical point of view. It is true that Abraham's donkey is probably the only donkey in the Bible which is lost, but to suggest that Jesus found Abraham's donkey would invite ridicule particularly taking into account that the donkey which Jesus found was "young." It is true that we do not know how old Abraham's donkey was, but taking into account the kind of labor it had been able to do for three days it could have been anything but young. To suppose that donkeys can live for thousands of years and actually get younger defies anything we know about donkeys in the real world and why should we stretch our imagination and think of Abraham's donkey when we know that donkeys can get lost easily when left unattended and lost animals are a constant occurrence in all cultures? Although a lost donkey is still private property, using lost property and even appropriating it happens all the time and that can easily explain what Jesus did. It is true that if this is how things really happened, it would raise questions about why would Jesus seize unattended property without attempting to get in touch with the owner, but some commentators solve the difficulty by suggesting that probably Jesus left a disciple to notify the owner and then returned the donkey promptly. As long as we know that ancient writers did not have our notion of accurate reporting and therefore were very careless about providing the proper details, we are justified, indeed, responsible to fill in the necessary details guided by how things must have happened. By explaining that Jesus must have left a disciple to notify the owner and must have returned the donkey we do not feel that we depart from the story but rather write it exactly as John himself would have written it if he had witnessed it with our notion of historical accuracy. After all, all

reporting omits information and details which are really there but are left out because are not deemed important. The concept of how things must have actually happened helps us to fill in the important details in order to make the story true as to how things really must have happened.

At closer examination, however, the concept of how things must have really happened instead of being the solution turns out to be the problem. John tells us that although the donkey was young, Jesus was able to sit on it and even to ride it. Again, commentators come to the rescue of the narrator suggesting that this must have been a miracle, and by definition, miracles are things that defy reality as we know it. Although it is true that gospel writers do relate events which defy reality as we know it, when they do so they make clear that they are dealing with a miracle and there is no suggestion in any of the four accounts about the donkey that there was anything miraculous involved in finding the donkey and in riding it. Although our notion of historical reporting helps us explain why ancient writers left out important details that are necessary for us to make sense of the text, it does not explain why the same narrators suddenly become so detail conscientious that they include details that become stumbling blocks and prevent us from making sense of the text. If this narrator is so taken up with the story that he forgets to tell us that Jesus had asked permission to use the donkey and then returned it, why wouldn't the same narrator just forget about the age of the donkey and confuse us with that detail even if the age of the donkey is historically accurate? It is as if John is trying to make it hard for us to imagine how Jesus actually rode the donkey. And what if that's exactly what he is trying to do? What if the real donkey which Jesus used for travel and the only one for which our historical thinking allows is precisely what John is trying to prevent us from thinking? That Jesus must have owned a donkey or possibly several which he used for his constant and extensive travels we can be certain although the Gospels only mention Jesus' means of transportation on water but never on land. To actually think of Jesus without a donkey is almost as unthinkable as to imagine a circuit rider Methodist preacher in the 19th century without a horse. To imagine that Jesus traveled on foot all the way to Jerusalem and decided to ride only when he entered the city makes as little sense as to imagine a modern traveler who would walk for days to come to a city and would rent a car only upon entering the city. What happened when Jesus approached Jerusalem was not that finally he discovered a donkey, but rather that his burden carrying donkey was abandoned just as Abraham's wood-carrying donkey was left behind so that a new donkey took over. What distinguished the two donkeys was not necessarily their physical identity but rather their function. The traveling donkey is not mentioned and is not described because it is irrelevant just as the clothes which Jesus wore on this occasion are not mentioned and are not described although we can be sure that Jesus was not naked. If a Gospel writer had wanted to refer to Jesus' donkey used for transportation, he would not have needed to provide any detail about it because

the first Christians had vivid recollections not only of what the donkey looked like but even of Jesus' riding habits. If the narrator, however, wants to talk about a donkey not as a means of transportation but as something else, the real donkey or the historical donkey becomes a problem, particularly for people who had good knowledge about donkeys as means of transportation, possibly even Jesus' real donkey(s). While Jesus' real donkey(s) carried his belongings and possibly his weight to spare his energy, this donkey carried his life in order to be sacrificed. Jesus needs to put aside his riding donkey and sit on the story-telling donkey. In order to help us not confuse the function of the donkey, the narrator is careful to disable the donkey from riding in order to enable it to talk. Contrary to our historical critical sensitivities, departures from reality were not meant to baffle our mind and block it, but rather to stimulate it and enable it to better grasp the meaning of the story. The real amazing thing is not that a young untrained donkey would let Jesus ride on it, but that Jesus would intentionally ride on a donkey meant to carry him to his death. The recollections and the imagination of the historical donkey needed to be blocked to allow the new donkey to explain what Jesus was determined to do. John purposefully blocks our imagination in order to open and stimulate our understanding. The traveling donkey had to be unloaded of Jesus' physical weight so that the speaking donkey could be loaded with Jesus' mission.

If it is true that John places Jesus on a donkey unqualified for riding in order to prevent us from thinking of Jesus real donkey in order to help us better understand what is happening in the Passion Narrative, then modern assumptions about objective reality are quite different from the ancient ones. According to the historical-critical scholarship, although ancient writers did not have the concept of what really happened and therefore their stories have important gaps, ancient readers did not have any difficulties in understanding the texts because their first-hand knowledge of the reality helped them fill in the gaps. The following comment on Matthew's story is typical about how modern interpreters explain our difficulties in making sense of ancient stories:

This account is one of many in the gospels in which the relevant circumstances were still so well known to the people when the oral tradition became fixed that they were not included. This can be very baffling for the reader in search of exact biographical detail. The high incidence of background information which is assumed or omitted as taken for granted is eloquent proof of the immediacy of the NT material—the transmitters of the oral tradition were not concerned beyond the immediate accuracy of transmission.⁷

By contrast, we who are distant in time and have lost contact with the reality behind the stories are no longer able to understand them unless we manage to recover the historical

⁷ W. F. Albright and C. S. Mann, *Matthew: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, The Anchor Bible 26 (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1971), 251.

reality by other means and that might provide us with the key to understanding ancient texts.

In the light of our story, however, it seems that these assumptions need to be questioned. If John intentionally suppresses the historical donkey, then it is not true that ancient people did not make the distinction between what really happened and what did not and how things really happened and how they did not. To assume that John was not aware that riding a young and untrained donkey departed from how things really happened is unwarranted. The real difference between ancient writers and modern scholars is that ancient people knew that how things really happened did not necessarily help people better understand the story, but rather often confused them. Therefore, sometimes they tried to force their readers to override what they knew about objective reality in order to properly understand the message. It is as if the more someone knew about Jesus' riding habits and his actual donkey(s), the more difficult it would have been to understand that this journey would end very differently from any of the previous journeys which Jesus had undertaken on his historical donkey(s). The more one knew about Jesus' historical traveling donkey(s) the more difficult it would be to understand that this donkey had to do with his historical death. Ancient writers knew what we seem to have forgotten, that sometimes what we know can prevent us from understanding than what we do not know. Sometimes to understand more or better is not to provide more details, but to suppress. While we try to supplement what we know, they tried to block something of what the readers knew. Therefore, they employed a device that I would call *reality blocker*. I would define reality blockers details in a story which would make it harder for a reader to take the story as an accurate description of how things regularly happen in order to enable the readers to grasp the meaning.

The device of a reality blocker can sometimes be amplified to increase its effect. As it was pointed out earlier, John uses the detail of age as a reality blocker, indicating that the donkey was young or little (ὄναριον). Mark and Luke also indicate that the animal was young by using the word "colt" (πῶλος), but expand the blocker by adding "that has never been ridden" (Mark 11:2; Luke 19:30). This explanation wants to make sure that the age of the donkey means that the donkey is not qualified for riding. The strongest blocker, however, is created by Matthew. Not only does he retain the detail of the animal being a colt and therefore young, but he adds the mother of the donkey implying that the donkey is so young that the mother is still nursing it. In order to make sure that readers do not suppose that Jesus rode on the mother and not on the young donkey, Matthew insists that Jesus actually rode on both of them: "mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey" (Matt 21:5). Hare correctly points out that there is no textual and linguistic justification for Mathew's phrase and suggests that Mathew's text must be based on how Jesus actually rode rather than on any Hebrew or Greek text:

According to the rules of Hebrew poetry, the original prophecy mentions only one animal (“on a donkey, on a colt the foal of a donkey”); both halves of the poetic description refer to a male animal. Here Matthew prepares a fresh Greek translation (he does not follow the Septuagint, capitalizing on the fact that the Greek word for donkey can be used for either sex). In this way he is able to take the first allusion to a donkey as referring to a she-ass and the second as speaking of her colt. Does Matthew make the prophecy correspond with the event or the event with his perception of the prophecy? Since the Evangelist undoubtedly knew the rules of poetic parallelism, there is perhaps a slight presumption in favor of the former. An unbroken colt usually accompanied its mother. He tells us that the disciples placed garments (their own cloaks, or saddle clothes?) on both animals and that Jesus sat on them. Some interpreters have ridiculed Matthew for suggesting that Jesus was astride two animals simultaneously. Others have suggested that, since it was common to sit on a donkey with both legs on the same side (sidesaddle style), it is possible that the clothes were thrown over both the donkey and the foal at her side, so that Jesus was seen as riding the pair.⁸

That Matthew wrote “so that Jesus was seen as riding the pair” seems to be the only *truth* that can possibly guide both the writing and the interpretation, indeed, even the re-writing of the prophecy. But what if Matthew’s purpose in writing was precisely to prevent us from seeing Jesus as riding in order to enable us to see Jesus as doing something else? What if he is trying to block our vision in order to open our mind?

If I am right that ancient writers used reality blockers to enable the readers to better understand a story, then the use of various blockers may still have some historical significance. All four gospel writers use reality blockers when using riding in order to indicate through riding something else than mere transportation. This suggests that all writers wrote at a time when donkeys were widespread means of transportation and that would imply that such a blocker would not be as necessary in a culture where standard means of transportation are cars rather than donkeys. We noticed that the strength of the blocker is different, with John’s being the weakest and Matthew’s the strongest. This graduation may not be insignificant. It is a well-established fact that John’s gospel is the latest and was addressed to an audience which was the most remote from the actual recollections of Jesus. This may explain why he needed a weaker blocker to prevent his readers from thinking about Jesus’ regular travels when reading the story. Matthew may have felt the need for a stronger blocker if he supposed that his readers had quite strong actual recollections of Jesus and of his real donkey(s). If my reasoning is correct, then it would imply that John’s account is the latest and Matthew’s account would be the oldest of the four, with the ones from Mark and Luke in between, somehow on a par. I say Mathew’s account and not Matthew’s Gospel because I do not want to suggest that the four Gospels as we have them are necessarily independent and original works. Actually, there is strong evidence that that is not the case. That the Synoptic Gospels are dependent

⁸ Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1993), 238–9.

on one another and possibly on a common source is a fact which probably no one who is familiar with the synoptic problem would question. The study of reality blockers, however, might provide important clues as to which stories are the oldest, and if such a study reveals that the reality blockers occur consistently in a specific gospel, then that would be a strong indication that it preserves the oldest materials, if it is not necessarily the oldest Gospel. If no such consistency can be established, then we are back at square one as far as the synoptic problem is concerned. The study of reality blockers would go way beyond the scope of this study and therefore I have no intention to pursue. Although the study of reality blockers is not of interest for solving the synoptic problem at this point, it is of extreme important for the study of ancient texts. If it is true than ancient writers used reality blockers as literary devices to better guide the reader to grasp the message, then the abundance of absurdities that modern scholars identify in ancient texts is not due to the fact that ancient people were not able to observe reality as a result of their supposed *mythical thinking*, but rather because they did not have a simplistic and reductionist understanding of reality as we do.

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