

HE SHALL BE CALLED A NAZARENE

Commentators have wrestled with what this means since nowhere in the OT do we have a record of any prophet, let alone prophets (plural), saying “*He shall be called a Nazarene.*” Yet, this is plainly what Matthew says.

Matthew 2:23 (NKJV)

23 And he came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, “He shall be called a Nazarene.”

Nazarene means one who is from Nazareth. Nazareth was a little town in Galilee about 55 miles north of Jerusalem, or about 100 miles from the edge of Egypt. Guesstimates put the population at probably several hundred people to maybe a thousand or more in the time of Christ. It was a fairly small place.

There have been several ideas as to how one might understand “***He shall be called a Nazarene***” in fulfillment of that which was spoken by the prophets.

Some have tried to associate this with the word “Nazirite”. But the word Nazirite has no Messianic significance and has no connection with the town of Nazareth. A person who took a Nazirite vow was not to drink wine, touch anything unclean, or cut his hair. Clearly, Jesus did drink wine, as seen in texts such as Matthew 11:19. Clearly, Jesus was not a Nazirite, so this view has no credibility.

Another view is that the word Nazarene in Hebrew has similar consonants (nzt) to those in the Hebrew word translated as “Branch” (Heb. naser) in Isaiah 11:1, which is a Messianic text.

However, this single text of Isaiah 11:1 presents a problem, because Matthew 2:23 says the prophets “plural” say this and not just one.

“By the prophets prevents our seeking only one OT passage, thus making doubtful any play on words based on *naser*, “branch” in Isa. 11:1.” –

Wycliffe Bible Commentary

There is another word translated as “Branch” (Heb. *tsemach*) designating the Messiah in the OT, but it is a completely different Hebrew word (cf. Isa. 4:2; Jer. 23:5; 33:15; Zech. 3:8; 6:12).

The most likely view of how to properly understand the phrase, “He shall be called a Nazarene,” is that in quoting from the OT prophets (plural), Matthew is simply presenting a general truth found in various prophets that present the Messiah as a Nazarene-like character – namely that He would be a despised person. Thus, Matthew is appealing to a prominent theme in the OT rather than to a specific text.

You see, Nazareth was seen as a little “backwater” place with a bad reputation, and those from there were looked down upon. So, the term Nazarene in Bible times was really a term of contempt (cf. Acts 24:5).

John 1:46 (NKJV)

46 And Nathanael said to him, ***“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”*** Philip said to him, “Come and see.”

“He is not saying that a particular OT prophet foretold that the Messiah would live in Nazareth; he is saying that the OT prophets foretold that the Messiah would be despised. ...In accord with prophecy, he came as the despised Servant of the Lord.” – **D.A. Carson**

Thus, the degrading term “**Nazarene**” was applied scornfully to both Christ and His followers (cf. Mt. 21:11; Mk. 14:67; Jn. 18:5, 7; Acts 24:5).

Psalms 22:6 (NKJV)

6 But I am a worm, and no man; A reproach of men, and despised by the people.

Isaiah 53:3 (NKJV)

3 He is despised and rejected by men, A Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him; He was despised, and we did not esteem Him.

This is what defined the Messiah. He was a despised Person. He was a “Nazarene” in keeping with how the prophets characterized the Messiah would be treated (cf. Jn. 7:41, 52; Ps. 69:8; 20-21; Isa. 49:7; Zech. 12:10; Matt. 8:20; 11:19; 15:7-8).

As we consider the surrounding section, note that all 3 of the prophetic emphases relate to oppression and affliction, which, while being portrayed in the OT, had a fuller application of fulfillment connected to the childhood experience of Christ.

v. 15 “Out of Egypt I called My Son.” (A context of oppression.)

v. 18 “Lamentation, weeping, and great mourning” (A context of oppression.)

v. 23 “He shall be called a Nazarene.” (A context of oppression.)

Prophetically, the Messiah would come into a context of oppression, and His experience would be one of contempt and being despised. This was certainly true of Jesus Christ, whose life culminated in being crucified on a Roman cross.

Hebrews 13:13 (NKJV)

13 Therefore let us go forth to Him, outside the camp, bearing His reproach.

To follow Christ closely involves “***bearing His reproach***.” If we really want to be a serious follower of Christ, we should prepare to be termed a “Nazarene” – in other words, a despised and unappreciated person. Let us go forth to Him bearing His reproach.

The prophetic portrait painted by the prophets is fulfilled perfectly in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Barry Leventhal was a young Jewish man who was a football player. His team won the Rose Bowl in 1966, and he was the star of the game. One day Hal (a campus minister) began a discussion with him about the Messianic prophecies. Hal began to show Barry how the predictions in the OT had been fulfilled in Jesus.

Finally, Barry blurted out:

“How could you do this?” Do what?” Hal asked.

“Use a trick Bible,” Barry charged, “You’ve got a trick Bible to fool the Jews.”

Hal responded, “What do you mean by a trick Bible?” Barry said, “You Christians took those so-called Messianic predictions from your own New Testament and then rewrote them into your edition of the Old Testament in order to fool the Jews, but I guarantee you those Messianic prophecies are not in the Jewish Bible.”

“Now hold on, Barry. Do you happen to have a copy of the Tanakh?” [The Hebrew Bible with 3 divisions of the Law, Prophets, and Writings.] Do you have your own copy?” “Well, I’ve got one from my Bar Mitzvah. So what?” Then Hal said, “I am going to give you some verses. I want you to write them down, and I want you to go read them in your own Tanakh and we’ll just leave it at that.”

Barry was intrigued, and that night, he sat down and opened up his old Tanakh that he hadn’t opened since he was 13 years old. He was shocked! Every prophecy Hal had given him was right there in his own Jewish Bible.

When he got to Isaiah 53, it really caused him to think. And as he continued to study the prophecies, he came to believe that Jesus truly is the Messiah. He became a true believer and went on to be a professor at an Evangelical Seminary.

Have you believed on the Lord Jesus Christ? In Him is found the fulfillment of the OT prophecies. He is the Lord and Savior of all those who truly from their heart believe in Him in a life changing way.

Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you too will be saved (cf. Acts 16:31).