

5. A Galilean Messiah (2:19–23)

Matthew 2:19 *But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt,*

Matthew 2:20 *saying, “Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, **for those who sought the child’s life are dead.**”*

when Herod died

“But now Herod’s distemper greatly increased upon him after a severe manner, and this by God’s judgment upon him for his sins: for a fire glowed in him slowly, which did not so much appear to the touch outwardly as it augmented his pains inwardly; (169) for it brought upon him a vehement appetite to eating, which he could not avoid to supply with one sort of food or other. His entrails were also exulcerated, and the chief violence of his pain lay on his colon; an aqueous and transparent liquor also settled itself about his feet, and a like matter afflicted him at the bottom of his belly. Nay, farther, his privy member was putrefied, and produced worms; and when he sat upright he had a difficulty of breathing, which was very loathsome, on account of the stench of his breath, and the quickness of its returns; he had also convulsions in all parts of his body, which increased his strength to an insufferable degree.”¹ He was 70 years old when he died.²

Herod’s death was probably about two months after the Magi appeared in Jerusalem, as a result, Joseph and Mary probably stayed in Egypt around three to six months.

for those who sought the child’s life are dead

Here again we see another parallel between Moses and Jesus built around the theme of a new Exodus making Israel the new Egypt.

“And the LORD said to Moses in Midian, “Go back to Egypt, for all the men who were seeking your life are dead.” (Exodus 4:19, ESV)

“All Jewish hearers remotely familiar with the Moses story would have recognized the allusion; like Moses, Jesus had outlived his persecutor and would lead his people to salvation (cf. 1:21; Acts 7:35).”³ Moses returned to his people after Pharaoh died, Jesus returns to his people after Herod dies.

The parallels between Jesus’ life and Moses’ life are very pronounced. And in fact, Israel was looking for such a man.

¹ Josephus, F., & Whiston, W. (1987). *The works of Josephus: complete and unabridged*. (Antiquities 17.6.5 §168–71) Peabody: Hendrickson.

² Heinrich August Wilhelm Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Gospel of Matthew* (ed. Frederick Crombie; trans. Peter Christie; vol. 1; Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1880), 96.

³ Keener, C. S. (2009). *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (p. 112). Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

“The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen—” (Deuteronomy 18:15, ESV)

Even after this event, as we noted earlier, Egypt continues to play a role in New Testament theology as can be seen in the Book of Revelation where John will call Jerusalem Egypt.

“and their dead bodies will lie in the street of the great city that symbolically is called Sodom and Egypt, where their Lord was crucified.” (Revelation 11:8, ESV)

Matthew 2:21 And he rose and took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel.

“As Moses escaped from Egypt to Midian for a period when his life was in danger, so Joseph and his family have escaped to Egypt. Now the danger is over, and just as Moses in Midian received a divine call to return to Egypt, so now does Joseph in Egypt, using the same words as God had used to Moses in Exod 4:19. **The “new Moses” can now return to the place in which his work of deliverance will be launched.**”⁴

Matthew 2:22 But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee.

“Augustus, after the death of Herod and the complications connected with it, divided the kingdom amongst his three sons in such a manner that *Archelaus* received the half of the four quarters of the kingdom, namely, Judea, Idumaea, and Samaria; *Antipas*, Galilee and Perea; *Philip*, Batanea, Trachonitis, and Auranitis.”⁵

Archelaus

“Probably Joseph had expected Herod Antipas to reign over the entire kingdom but Herod the Great made a late change in his will, dividing his kingdom into three parts. Archelaus, known for his ruthlessness, was given Judea, Samaria, and Idumea.... Augustus Caesar agreed and gave him the title “ethnarch” (more honorable than “tetrarch”) and promised the title “king” if it was earned. But Archelaus proved to be a poor ruler and was banished for misgovernment in A.D. 6.”⁶

“Josephus’ record (*Ant.* 17.200–344) of Archelaus’ brief and unstable rule alone supplies an adequate basis for Joseph’s conclusion that Judea would be no safer under

⁴ France, R. T. (2007). *The Gospel of Matthew* (p. 89). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co.

⁵ Heinrich August Wilhelm Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Gospel of Matthew* (ed. Frederick Crombie; trans. Peter Christie; vol. 1; Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1880), 96.

⁶ Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 96). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

him than under his father; Josephus says that he had begun his reign by massacring some 3,000 Passover celebrants....”⁷

the district of Galilee

“To be sure, another son of Herod, Herod Antipas, ruled as ethnarch over Galilee and Perea. But he was a more tolerant ruler, and Galilee in his day became known for revolutionary sentiments that would never have been tolerated by his father.”⁸



⁷ France, R. T. (2007). *The Gospel of Matthew* (p. 91). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co.

⁸ Hagner, D. A. (1998). *Matthew 1–13* (Vol. 33A, p. 39). Dallas: Word, Incorporated.

Mary and Joseph were at home in the hills of Lower Galilee, a region under the control of Herod the Great then, after 4 B.C., governed by his son, Antipas. In the eyes of a Judean, this was a bit of a frontier land, but for those stout of spirit who were willing to work hard, Galilee offered a comfortable home. At the same time, corridors of Hellenism pierced the region, flowing mainly through the fertile Jezreel and Beth Netofa valleys.⁹

Matthew 2:23 And he went and lived in a city called **Nazareth**, so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene.

“Judea has become an unsafe place for the new Moses, even after the death of the “Pharaoh” whose murderous jealousy initially caused his exile.”¹⁰

Nazareth



⁹ Wright, P. H. (2012). *Rose Then and Now Bible Map Atlas with Biblical Background and Culture* (p. 170). Torrance, CA: Rose Publishing.

¹⁰ France, R. T. (2007). *The Gospel of Matthew* (p. 89). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co.



Bedrock lies close to the surface on the Nazareth Ridge, a blessing for builders but a bane for farming. From these rocks skilled craftsmen such as Joseph and Jesus wrestled building stone from the ground and carefully shaped it into blocks for homes for the growing families of Nazareth. It was a necessary and helpful trade, and Joseph's family likely prospered as he worked his skills in Nazareth and nearby villages and cities.¹¹

“Archaeological evidence in the region of Nazareth indicates that many people had moved there from Judea, from the area near Bethlehem.”¹² In some sense, this would explain why Joseph was living there before his marriage to Mary.

“Fifteen miles to the west of the southern end of the Sea of Galilee, Nazareth was a quite insignificant town in biblical times and is never mentioned in the OT. Projections from archaeological evidence suggest a maximum population of no more than 500.”¹³

Nazareth was the home town of Joseph and Mary and where they returned at this time.

¹¹ Wright, P. H. (2012). *Rose Then and Now Bible Map Atlas with Biblical Background and Culture* (p. 171). Torrance, CA: Rose Publishing.

¹² Keener, C. S. (1993). *The IVP Bible background commentary: New Testament* (Mt 2:23). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

¹³ Nolland, J. (2005). *The Gospel of Matthew: A commentary on the Greek text*. New International Greek Testament Commentary (128). Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press.

“In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin’s name was Mary.” (Luke 1:26–27, ESV)

“...a move away from Bethlehem was prudent, and Antipas was a less threatened ruler. Galilee enters Matthew’s story as a less dangerous place to be than Judea....”¹⁴

spoken by the prophets

It is interesting that “this is the only place in the entire Gospel where Matthew makes reference to “**prophets**” in the plural (rather than a singular “prophet”) as the source of an OT reference suggesting that he knows that **he is not quoting one text directly but rather is summing up a theme found in several prophetic texts.**”¹⁵

fulfilled πληρόω

This is the same word we studied in 1:22, 2:15 and 2:17. As you remember, like most words, it has a variety of possible translations.

So the words “**increased understanding**”, “**filling up**”, “**completely filled up**”, “**fills up with additional meaning**” and “**bring to full significance**” appear to be close to the meaning of **fulfill**.

he would be called a Nazarene

““He shall be called a Nazorean” does not in fact occur anywhere in the OT, nor, as far as we know, in any other contemporary literature. **As a matter of fact Nazareth, as a relatively newly founded settlement, is never mentioned in the OT....**”¹⁶

Here are three ideas on how Matthew may be using Nazarene.

“Three main explanations have been suggested.

First, he may be making a play on words, noting the similarity between “Nazarene” and the Hebrew *nēšer* (“branch”)....

“The main text linked with the *nšr* root is Is. 11:1: ‘There will come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and from his roots a sprout (*nēšer*) will blossom’. This is clearly a messianic text. If this were to be the text Matthew had in mind, it would take us back to the Davidic categories which were especially evident in 1:18–25 and 2:1–11.”¹⁷

¹⁴ Nolland, J. (2005). *The Gospel of Matthew: A commentary on the Greek text*. New International Greek Testament Commentary (127). Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press.

¹⁵ Beale, G. K., & Carson, D. A. (2007). *Commentary on the New Testament use of the Old Testament* (11). Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, UK: Baker Academic; Apollos.

¹⁶ France, R. T. (2007). *The Gospel of Matthew* (p. 92). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co.

¹⁷ Nolland, J. (2005). *The Gospel of Matthew: A commentary on the Greek text*. New International Greek Testament Commentary (130). Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press.

This is a reasonable possibility because “Jewish exegesis commonly revocalized and repunctuated texts to yield new interpretations....”¹⁸

Second, he may be using “Nazarene” as a derogatory slang term for someone from the insignificant little town of Nazareth in Galilee—the same attitude that seems to be reflected by Nathanael in John 1:46: “Can any good thing be from Nazareth?” Isaiah 53:2, a text that Christians would come to associate with Jesus in his role as Suffering Servant, and that spoke of one who grew up like a tender shoot but had no beauty or majesty to make him humanly attractive, could tie in with this view of Nazarenes as “backwoodsmen” or “country bumpkins”

Third, perhaps Matthew is alluding to Judg. 13:7, in which God tells Samson’s mother that her son will be a Nazirite, especially since this verse also includes a promise that the woman will conceive and bear a son, similar to Matt. 1:21

Although Jesus was not a literal Nazirite (refraining from strong drink and haircuts), he could be seen as a charismatic individual empowered by the Spirit just as Samson had been

Alternatively, “Nazirite” could mean “holy,” and Matthew could be referring to Isa. 4:3 by substituting the former word for the latter¹⁹

The first option above seems to be the most popular one in the commentaries. However, the biggest problem this options faces is that this “word-play is totally invisible in Greek, the language in which Matthew is writing.”²⁰ That fact speaks strongly against it.

The third option is a problem for although “Samson was a miraculously-born savior-figure, his notoriously amoral life-style is not an attractive option as a type of the Messiah.”²¹ And in fact Jesus did apparently cut his hair, drink wine and touch dead bodies. So, there is no close correspondence here.

Let’s flesh out the second option a bit. Nazareth in Galilee was a despised village.

“They replied, “Are you from Galilee too? Search and see that no prophet arises from Galilee.” (John 7:52, ESV)

“Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip said to him, “Come and see.” (John 1:46, ESV)

¹⁸ Keener, C. S. (2009). *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (p. 114). Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

¹⁹ Beale, G. K., & Carson, D. A. (2007). *Commentary on the New Testament use of the Old Testament* (11). Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, UK: Baker Academic; Apollos.

²⁰ France, R. T. (2007). *The Gospel of Matthew* (p. 92). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co.

²¹ France, R. T. (2007). *The Gospel of Matthew* (p. 93). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co.

“... Jesus grew up, not as “Jesus the Bethlehemite,” with its Davidic overtones, but as “Jesus the Nazarene,” with all the opprobrium of the sneer.”²²

“When Christians were referred to in Acts as the “Nazarene sect” (24:5), the expression was meant to hurt.”²³

“For we have found this man a plague, one who stirs up riots among all the Jews throughout the world and is a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes.” (Acts 24:5, ESV)

“First-century Christian readers of Matthew, who had tasted their share of scorn, would have quickly caught Matthew’s point. 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....**”²⁴

*“But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by mankind and **despised** by the people.”* (Psalm 22:6, ESV)

*“Thus says the LORD, the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One, to one deeply **despised**, abhorred by the nation, the servant of rulers....”* (Isaiah 49:7, ESV)

*“For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. He was **despised** and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.”* (Isaiah 53:2–3, ESV)

“In other words Matthew gives us the substance of several OT passages, not a direct quotation....”²⁵ And the meaning of all these Old Testament passages is that the coming One is despised by men. As a result, **he would be called a Nazarene** is understood as he would be despised as one who lived in such a low class village would be.

“...Nazareth was a city in the despised and alien far north, Galilee of the Gentiles, the land of darkness (Mt. 4:14–16, quoting Is. 9:1–2), and Nazareth was specifically a city that was proverbially unlikely to produce anything that was any good (Jn. 1:46). So to

²² Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 97). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

²³ Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 97). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

²⁴ Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 97). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

²⁵ Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 97). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

be a Nazarene was likely to mean being despised and rejected by men, as prophecy had described the servant of Yahweh.”²⁶

“For someone to be “called a Nazorean,” especially in connection with a messianic claim, was therefore to invite ridicule: the name is in itself a term of dismissal if not of actual abuse.”²⁷ All solutions are difficult, but this one does not suffer the liabilities of options one and three above and it does capture the attitude of many towards Jesus’ humble upbringing. If this is the case, then **in our language, they would be calling Jesus something like an Appalachian hillbilly. For Nathanael to ask “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” would sound something like “Can anything good come out of Mud Hollar?”**

“On this view, then, the words “He shall be called a Nazorean” represent the prophetic expectation that the Messiah would appear from nowhere and would as a result meet with incomprehension and rejection. Of course the prophets could not speak specifically of Nazareth, which did not even exist when they wrote. But the connotations of the derogatory term Nazorean as applied in the first century to the messianic pretender Jesus captured just what some of the prophets had predicted—a Messiah who came from the wrong place, who did not conform to the expectations of Jewish tradition, and who as a result would not be accepted by his people.”²⁸

It is not easy to understand why Matthew would speak so elusively. But keep in mind that when he wrote about A.D. 55-65, Christians were identified in a pejorative fashion as members of the sect of the Nazarenes or in our era something like “the soggy bottom boys.” So, the passage to this first century audience was no doubt not elusive at all.

In summary: “In each of these vignettes from the opening years of Jesus’ life, then, a key place is taken by a reference to Old Testament prophecy, as if to say, ‘You will understand Jesus aright only if you see him as the fulfilment of a gracious purpose of God contemplated and announced by him centuries before.’ In particular, if you find it surprising that he should be conceived out of wedlock, born in a little town like Bethlehem rather than in Jerusalem, hurried off to Egypt at an early age, indirectly the cause of the death of scores of baby boys, and eventually brought up in unfashionable Nazareth, then consider the fact that all these features of his early years are spoken of by the prophets.”²⁹

²⁶ Goldingay, J. (1982). The Old Testament and Christian faith: Jesus and the Old Testament in Matthew 1–5. *Themelios: Volume 8, No. 1, September 1982*, 6–7.

²⁷ France, R. T. (2007). *The Gospel of Matthew* (p. 94). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co.

²⁸ France, R. T. (2007). *The Gospel of Matthew* (p. 95). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co.

²⁹ Goldingay, J. (1982). The Old Testament and Christian faith: Jesus and the Old Testament in Matthew 1–5. *Themelios: Volume 8, No. 1, September 1982*, 7.