



have been recognized by his Jewish audience. Whatever the case, we are blessed to learn from the Gospel of Matthew yet another way in which the life of Jesus fulfilled what the Old Testament promised regarding the Messiah.

source (McNeile 21). If Nazareth drew its name from the Heb. *nazar* (i.e. “a place set apart”) Matthew may draw on the deeper meaning of the city’s name in application to the prophecies that Jesus would be called a Nazerene (i.e. “a Holy One of God”). If not, he may simply use a word play which might easily

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McNeile, Alan Hugh. *The Gospel According to Matthew*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1965.

Meyer, Heinrich August Wilhelm *Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Matthew*. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1880.



Faithful Sayings Issue 11.39 September 27, 2009

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ISSUE

11.39

BULLETIN OF
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Faithful Sayings

September 27
2009



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“He Shall Be Called a Nazarene”

by Kyle Pope

The Gospel of Matthew records an important prophecy which Jesus fulfilled that poses a number of interesting challenges to the student of Scripture. The text reads, “**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’” (Matthew 2:23, NKJV). The puzzling issue is that we do not have an Old Testament text which uses this exact wording. *To what then is Matthew referring?*

Luke’s gospel indicates that Nazareth was Joseph’s home before the birth of Jesus (Luke 2:4). Apparently Mary and Joseph stayed in Bethlehem for a time after Jesus’ birth (cf. 2:10,16). After their time in Egypt Jesus’ family returned to Nazareth (cf. Luke 2:39). Matthew tells us that this happened that prophecy “**might be fulfilled.**” It is common for Matthew to point out when Jesus’ life fulfilled Old Testament prophecy. In this instance he declares that Jesus’ return to Nazareth was something “**which was spoken by the prophets.**” Matthew’s use of the plural “prophets” here is significant, in that he does not quote a specific Old Testament Scripture, but refers to a general prophecy revealed in Scripture that “**He shall be called a Nazarene.**” There is much debate over what Matthew is referring to. Some have suggested that this reflects an oral prophecy not recorded in Scripture. Yet, Meyer notes that, “always, where in the New Testament the *prophets* are quoted, those in the completed canon are meant” (98).

In the context it is clear that Matthew uses the Gr.*nazoraaios* of one who dwells in Nazareth. However, there is good evidence that *nazoraaios* carried an extended meaning. The third century religious writer Tertullian, in his work *Against Marcion*, refers to this text and uses the Lat. *Nazarenos* as synonymous with the “Nazirites” of Lamentations 4:7 (4.8). The Heb. verb *nazar* referred to something which was consecrated or set apart. It was a near synonym of the more common Heb. *qadash* of the same meaning. This can be seen

in Leviticus 22:2 where Aaron and his sons are commanded to “separate” (*nazar*) from the things which they “dedicate” (*qadash*) to the Lord. There was a special application of *nazar* in the Old Testament, to those who took the Nazirite vow of special consecration unto the Lord (Num. 6:1-20). In reference to Samson as a Nazirite the Greek Old Testament (LXX) in some cases transliterated the Heb. *nazar* with the Gr. *nazir* or *naziraios* (Judg. 16:17) and in some cases used the Gr. *hagios*, the more common word for one who was set apart or holy. The New Testament uses this word for Christians as “saints” (i. e. those “set apart” by the gospel). If Matthew had in mind this use of *nazoraaios*, to indicate that the Messiah would be a Holy One, set apart unto God, we find this idea running throughout the Old Testament (cf. Ps. 16:10; Is. 10:17 and in the NT Mark 1:24; Acts 2:27; 3:14). The fourth century Latin scholar Jerome, in his commentary on Matthew writes:

If he was intending to show a fixed Scripture, he would not have said, “that which was spoken through the prophets,” but simply, “that which was spoken through the prophet.” However, as it is, speaking of “prophets” plural, he shows that he is not choosing the words of Scripture, but the sense. *Nazarene* is interpreted “holy.” That the Lord would be holy, all Scripture relates (2:23, Pope).

Jerome goes on to suggest that the Heb. *natser* “branch” could be the connection between *nazoraaios* in Matthew and Isaiah 11:1, but his first argument seems more plausible

and was accepted by Erasmus, Calvin, and Beza. The objection that is some times offered to this interpretation is that Jesus never took a Nazirite vow nor lived such a lifestyle. However, it is clear that the noun *nazir* is not only applied to those who have taken the vow, but to separation in general (cf. Gen. 49:26; Deut. 33:16, see Lightfoot 2.44). The verb *nazar* can have very broad application (cf. Lev. 15:31; 22:2; Num. 6:2; Ezek. 14:7; Hos. 9:10). The Messiah would be “set apart” to God in the ultimate sense.

*If Matthew was speaking of the Messiah as one prophecy had named a “Holy One” who was “set apart” how does this relate to the city of Nazareth? The etymology of the name of the city of Nazareth is uncertain. Scholars acknowledge that either *nazar* “separate” or *netser* “branch” could be the*



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