

**“HE SHALL BE CALLED A NAZARENE”:
THE OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND OF MATTHEW 2:23**

INTRODUCTION

In the beginning of the Gospel of Matthew we see the Holy Family fleeing to Egypt from the wrath of Herod the Great. Upon Herod's death, his son, Archelaus, assumed the rule as Ethnarch of Judea. Archelaus was as harsh as his father so Joseph took Mary and Jesus to Nazareth in Galilee. Matthew writes;

“And having come [to Galilee] he dwelt in a city called Nazareth so that should be fulfilled that having been spoken through the prophets that a Nazarene will he be called”.

There has been much scholarly debate over the meaning of the designation, “Nazarene”. To understand Matthew's use of the peculiar title one must understand the context in which he wrote. Matthew grounds the Gospel in Jewish Theology. As J.L. McKenzie writes;

“The Jewish Christian character of Mt is evident in his conception of Jesus as the fulfillment of the OT, a theme more prominent in Mt than in Mk-Lk; ...The idea of fulfillment is basic in Mt and perhaps original with him; but it would be a misconception to understand fulfillment in terms merely of prediction of future events. Jesus fulfills the OT by being the reality which is initiated in the OT, which, because it is the earlier phase of a single saving act, exhibits a community of character and traits with Jesus”.¹

K. Nickle also points to the “conspicuous feature” of the Gospel in which there is an “extensive use of citations and allusions to the religious traditions recorded in the Jewish Scriptures”. In this use, Matthew “creatively combined two major religious traditions which were valued by the early Christians: the Jewish Scriptures and the stories about Jesus”. Nickle argues;

“Matthew assumed that his audience was familiar with the Jewish Scriptures. (He also assumed familiarity with Jewish customs and expressions, Jewish oral tradition, and rabbinical interpretation.) His argument sometimes depended on

¹ J.L. McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible* (Chicago: Bruce, 1965) 555.

the ability of his hearers to consider the broader Old Testament context in which the texts he cited originally appeared. . . His search for an appropriate passage that would conform to an event in the Jesus tradition sometimes led him to quote a passage without regard for its context. . . Occasionally Matthew appeals to a Jewish tradition in such a vague way that the Scripture he had in mind is uncertain, at least to us”.²

R.E. Brown argues that Matthew 1-2 should be considered as a literary unit. Within this unit, Matthew uses 5 references to Scripture. Matthew 1 presents deals with questions of the “who and how” of Jesus’ identity and the “scriptural citations help chap 2 to bring out the *where* of his birth and the *whence* or place to which his childhood brought him. When the readers finish the birth narrative, they have been given a whole OT background from the Law and the Prophets”.³ For Matthew, the birth account introduces and summarizes the core of his theology.

For Matthew, we propose that this designation was not simply a variant on the place-name, Nazareth. Rather, we must see this singular description as a way of connecting Jesus to the prophets of the Old Testament and the messianic line.

MATTHEW AND PROPHECY

It is generally accepted among scholars that “fulfillment” was a key element in Matthew’s theology. Prophets and prophecy had a long and rich history in Israel which was not lost on Matthew. Matthew understood that the concept of “prophecy” meant more than simple predictions, particularly when related to the life of Jesus. In his Gospel, as well as other New Testament writings, “there is a reference to an OT character or event which illustrates the reality of the process of salvation, the reality which is fulfilled in Jesus Christ”. Matthew and the other New Testament “take a specialized and apologetic view of the OT which is not intended to be a general exhaustive interpretation. ‘Fulfillment’ is more than fulfillment of a prediction; it is the fulfillment of a hope, a destiny, a plan, a reality”.⁴

² K. Nickle, *The Synoptic Gospels; An Introduction* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1980) 99-100.

³ R.E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (NY: Doubleday, 1997) 176..

⁴ McKenzie, *Dictionary*, 698.

Nickle argues that Matthew “emphasized the rhythm of ‘promise-fulfillment’ in his rewriting of the story of Jesus to stress that God achieved in Jesus those saving purposes which he had revealed in the Jewish Scripture”. He continues;

“Such a use of the Jewish Scriptures was serviceable particularly in the Christian mission to the Jews. Matthew probably adopted and intensified a manner of argument that had been developed much earlier in the Christian missionary preaching tradition”.⁵

Matthew, according to Brown, “has uniquely standardized the fulfillment of the prophetic word”. Brown continues;

“In finding this fulfillment, Matthew usually makes no attempt to interpret the large contextual meaning of the cited OT passage; rather there is a concentration on the details where there is a resemblance to Jesus or the NT event . . . the citations have a didactic purpose, informing Christian readers and giving support to their faith . . . as if to emphasize that the whole of Jesus’ life, down to the last detail, lay within God’s foreordained plan. Probably Matthew is continuing the invocation of Scripture begun in early Christian preaching, but is doing so now when the primary address is to settled Christian communities who need to be taught”.⁶

Matthew, when not transcribing Markan passages, was very free when presenting his citations. At times he was very literal in his citations, when he used Isaiah 7:14 in the birth account. However, other times he seemed to use the words of the prophets in composite summary form, as in 2:23, where no name was attached and the general title, “prophets” was employed. It could be argued that Matthew formed a composite rendering of meanings found in the words of Scripture and the Prophets. Brown speaks of the possibility of a “free rendering by the evangelist”. He argues;

“In the many instances where the Matthean evangelist was the first to see the possibilities of an OT fulfillment, he would presumably choose or even adapt a wording that would best fit his purposes. . . Besides using the formula citations to fit the general theology of the unity of God’s plan, the Matthean evangelist selected them to serve his particular theological and

⁵ Nickle, 102.

⁶ Brown, 207

pastoral interests in addressing a mixed Christian community of Jews and Gentiles.”⁷

A number of scholars have introduced the idea of a “handbook of OT texts devised for the use of Jewish Christians from which it could be argued that Jesus is the Messiah of the OT”. The existence of such a “handbook” would explain the various uses Scripture and prophecy found in the Gospel. It might well have acted as a distillation or compendium of the various sources and argument which circulated in the 1st Century. However, Matthew’s singular use may reflect his own background and redactional style or as McKenzie suggests, “Matthew may have supplemented the texts of such a handbook by some he gathered himself; or he may simply have used more of the texts given than Mark did”.⁸

JUDGES 13:5

Scholars have often noted that the Prophetic text proclaiming the title of “Nazarene” is obscure. We propose, following some scholarly suggestions, that Matthew is quoting Judges 13:5, the birth account of Samson. To claim that Samson, and the book of Judges, would be part of “prophetic” writings one must look at the historical circumstance of Matthew and 1st Century Jewish writings. The book of Judges was considered to be part of the “Former Prophets”. The prophetic books, the *Nevi'im*, was the second great division of the Hebrew Bible; the *Tanakh*. Most scholars agree that this canon was fixed by the council of Rabbis c. 100 AD. According to McKenzie, and others, Matthew exhibits close affinities to rabbinic argument.⁹ If he were associated with Rabbis throughout the middle 1st Century, he would have been familiar with the title, “Former Prophets”, and have been comfortable enough to use these Scriptures in a Christian context. Our proposal is further supported by his general designation, “the prophets”. No prophet is named because in the birth account of Samson, the speaker of these words will not give his name; only saying that it is mysterious (Judges 13:17-18).

Matthew was depicting a miraculous birth, similar to the “sons of promise”; Isaac, Samson, and John the Baptist.¹⁰ Although instead of using some agent or messenger, as in the Isaac and Samson account along with the Lukan Baptist

⁷ *Ibid.*, 208.

⁸ J.L. McKenzie, “The Gospel According to Matthew”. *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* 2 vols (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1968) 2:64.

⁹ McKenzie, “Matthew”, 64.

¹⁰ CF; Roskoski, J. “Isaac and Samson: Sons of Promise”, *AJBT* 17:17 (Sunday, 4/24/16).

account, Matthew used Scripture to announce the child. Matthew also uses another sign of God's intervention; The Spirit. While some scholars try to distinguish between the "Spirit of the Lord" in the Old Testament and the "Holy Spirit" in the New Testament we propose that it is the same Divine force which acts on creation to bring about God will. Both Matthew and Luke attribute the Virgin Birth to the power of the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:35). Modern scholars call those who have the Spirit bestowed upon them "charismatic" and are designated for special roles in the unfolding plan of Salvation.¹¹ Matthew knows the history presented in the book of Judges and that of all "charismatic leaders" only one had multiple experiences of the YHWH Spirit; Samson (Judges 13:25, 14:6, 19, 15:14). Mary is now to be counted among the "charismatic" figures of the Scriptures (Matthew 1:18, 20). Matthew is also making a strong link between the birth account of Jesus and the Samson narratives with the element of the Charisma. Other, perhaps less prominent, parallels exists between the birth account of Samson and the Matthean birth account of Jesus. The angel comes to Mary to announce the forthcoming birth, as does the angel or messenger to Samson's mother (Judges 13:3). In both instances, the mission of the son is spelled out in the announcement (Judges 13:5). Yet, in each case the angel has to explain it again to the father (Judges 13:8-14). In each instance, the mother is called upon for a response to the announcement; Mary to ignore any unseemly breaking of Jewish marriage law for the betrothed and Samson's mother by resigning to strict dietary restrictions to provide the proper host for the son that was to arrive. It is a strong parallel that although the mothers are vessels of the special child and are given the news, it is the fathers' faith-filled actions, based on the words of the angels, which garner the attention. It is no coincidence or accident that Matthew makes such an egregious link between the birth account and the Samson narratives' birth account. The Samson narratives contain one of the most detailed birth accounts in all of Scripture. In Manoah, Matthew would see an archetype of faith that was completed in Joseph. With the mother of Samson, Matthew sees an archetype of Mary in the popular accounts of the Former Prophets.

Once the link between the parents is made clear, Matthew forges a link between Samson and Jesus. Matthew seems to be employing a word-play on the root, *NZR*. J. Kühlewein comments that this root "referred originally to something removed from everyday life, elevated above the customary and set aside for

¹¹ CF; Roskoski, J. "Mary's Charisma; Biblical Fulfillment, Role Ordained" *AJBT* 14:48 (Sunday, 12/01/13).

something special, dedicated.”¹² In each instance we see the mission as being based on deliverance and salvation; Samson from the Philistines who were blocking full possession of the Promised Land and Jesus from the power of sin which was blocking entry into in the Kingdom of God.

Another connection lies in the LXX, in that it “associates this root with holiness”.¹³ Expanding upon this statement, we would point out that the idea of holiness is found in Judges 16:17 of the LXX, wherein Samson refers to himself as a “holy one of God” (*Hagios Theo*). This is the only occurrence of the title in the LXX Old Testament. David was referred to as “your holy one”, in Psalm 16:10, but in a different linguistic construction. . Matthew must have been aware of this translation, as it began in the 3rd century BC and continued to c. 130 AD. With his education, it is likely that he was aware of the association between “holiness” and the root, *NZR*. With the obscure term, Nazarene, Matthew can make a direct connection between Samson and Jesus. J. Meier, supporting this peoposed connection, states that Jesus is called a Nazarene “in the sense of the truly consecrated holy one who will save his people”, as seen in the birth account of Samson (Judges 13:5, 7).¹⁴

By combining the *Tanakh* and the LXX, something well within Matthew’s proficiency, he can provide a solid Jewish Scriptural base for his readers. At the same time he can invoke a popular deliverer, who was remembered by the New Testament writers (Hebrews 11:32), and build a theological bridge from David to Jesus.

THE “BRANCH”

A primary concern of Matthew was that Jesus was depicted as fulfilling all of Scripture; the Prophets and the Law. To avoid questions or scandal, Matthew focused on the actions of Joseph when Mary was discovered to be pregnant. Joseph accepted Mary and her forthcoming baby, in accord with the law as stated in Numbers 30.¹⁵ Therefore, he could use the Mosaic code to describe

¹² J.Kühlewein, “consecrated person”, *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* 3 vols.(Peabody: Hendrickson, 1997) 2:727

¹³ S. Goranson, “nazarenes”, *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 6 vols (NY: Doubleday 1992) 4:1049.

¹⁴ J. Meier, “Matthew, Gospel of”, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* 6 vols (NY: Doubleday, 1992) 4:630.

¹⁵ According to vv. 11-12, by not objecting to Mary’s acceptance of her role in God’s plan he validated it. Also, in this situation, under the law, the husband will replace the father in the protection of the girl’s virginity. Cf.

Roskoski, J. [“The Matthean Depiction of Mary’s Virginity”, *Mother of All Peoples* \(Sat. Jan. 9, 2010\)](http://www.motherofallpeoples.com/2010/01/the-matthean-depiction-of-marys-virginity/)

this family. To further depict the importance of Joseph, Matthew used the line of Joseph to show that Jesus was the “Son of David” (Matthew 1:1-17).

With his term “Nazarene”, Matthew seems to echo the image of David. There is assonance, another word-play, with the term, *netser*, meaning “branch”. McKenzie points to the “assonance between the word *netser* and the town name “Nazareth”.¹⁶ This term gains particular significance in light of Isaiah 11:1, wherein we read of a “branch” growing from the “roots of Jesse”. This is clear Davidic imagery, supporting the genealogy of the previous chapter, and affirming that Jesus is of the messianic line which was begun with David (2 Samuel 7:16, Psalm 89:20-38).

For Matthew to conflate the images of Samson and David with this term is a simple recognition that Samson began the war with the Philistines (Judges 13:5) which David finished (2 Samuel 5). For his Jewish-Christian audience, Matthew is drawing a broad parallel. Samson cleared the way for the Davidic Kingship, not unlike John the Baptist preparing the way for Jesus, by his weakening of the Philistines and beginning the process of deliverance. To extend the metaphor, by his triumphs Samson over the Philistines Samson provided fertile ground in which the roots of Jesse could grow into the messianic line. Supporting our proposition of a broad parallel is the juxtaposition of the prophetic phrase “he shall be called a Nazarene” and the appearance of The Baptist proclaiming his message (Matthew 3:1-3), echoes Isaiah 40:3. Therefore, Isaiah’s prophecies supply strong buttressing of Matthew’s image.

The term, *netser*, is favored by Isaiah among the cluster of synonymous words; *hoter* and *semah*. J. Bracke argues that the “sense of branch as the legitimate scion” is present. Therefore, the branch, or more specifically righteous branch, should be understood as the legitimate or rightful Davidic scion to the throne of Israel”.¹⁷ Such favoring of very specific terms, that are heavily laden with precise imagery, is a common device among the prophecies of Isaiah.

THE CLIMACTIC DESIGNATION

In citing this prophecy and drawing attention to this obscure title, *Nazarene*, Matthew has built a powerful climax to the birth account. The first characteristic is how stark the line is constructed. It is unique in this feature. Although the

¹⁶ McKenzie, “Matthew”, 64.

¹⁷ J. Bracke, “branch”, *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 6 vols (NY: Doubleday 1992) 1:776.

prophecy of Egypt (2:15) is similarly short, it is easily traced to Hosea 11:1. The Nazarene prophecy comes from the “prophets” and, as has been argued, must be freely applied. However, the imagery of Davidic Israel which serves as its backdrop is very concrete to the Jewish audience. The allusion to Isaiah 11:1, and the roots of Jesse, complements the prophecy in Matthew 2:6 in which we see Bethlehem of Judah foretold to be the tribe who bring forth the ruler, quoting Micah 5:1.

The image of Judah is linked to both Samson and David. The exploits of Samson against the Philistines in Judges 14-15 all occurred in areas and towns in and around Judahite territory. Although some places were originally Danite, they went to Judahite control when the Danites were consolidated to a “clan” (Judges 13:2) or when the Danites migrated northward (Judges 18). The charisma of Samson was a tribal memory or tradition of Judah, as the nazirite tradition began as a Danite memory. These two sets of memories are very likely to be the reason there are two conclusions in the Samson narratives (Judges 15:20 and 16:31).¹⁸ The conflation of the two memories was begun by Samson’s own words to Delilah, wherein he made his hair the physical sign of his charisma (Judges 16:17). It was the popularity of Samson’s successful charismatic feats against the Philistines that helped David build an argument for his throne.

That Samson was also associated with Judah supported the David position. David established his throne in Judah, uniting Israel theologically and politically, and his court history relied heavily on pro-Judah traditions. While Moses galvanized the tribes around the Yahwist religious faith, with the Law and Covenant, David formed a nation. Under David, uniting the twelve tribes, Israel came to power on the world scene. David built on the faith mediated by Abraham, the Covenant mediated by Moses, and the conquest and settlement of Joshua and the Judges to establish Israel. David wanted to present his kingship as the fulfillment of these historical forces.¹⁹ He used the traditions of the great leaders and heroes to reinforce his historical argument. David is seen as the first true King of the first true Israel. Therefore, it would small wonder that Matthew would see Jesus as creating a new type of Israel. Jesus was introducing a new concept of Israel and the Kingdom of God and Matthew had to confront the concerns of his community as to where they would stand in the new messianic age. His purpose was not to erase the memory of Israel, but to redefine it.

¹⁸ Cf. Roskoski, J. “The Length of Samson’s Judgeship” *AJBT* 18:14 (Sunday, 4/2/2017).

¹⁹ McKenzie, *Dictionary*, 656.

Matthew saw Jesus as bringing about a fulfillment of Israel and her history. The “idea of fulfillment is basic” to Matthew and the New Testament and may have been “original with him” or, at the very least, formulated and codified by him. To revisit the argument which McKenzie proposes and its distinct understanding;

“but it would be a misconception to understand fulfillment in terms merely of prediction of future events. Jesus fulfills the OT by being the reality which is initiated in the OT, which, because it is an earlier phase of a single saving act, exhibits a community of character and traits with Jesus.”²⁰

Therefore, Matthew is presenting a new stage in the existence of Israel, part of a continuum that spans the Testaments. Matthew, more than the other Gospels, introduces a “historicizing tendency”. Jesus is a singular transitional event. Jesus fulfills “that salvation for which the fathers and the prophets prepared”. However, it is a distinct period from the anticipated period of the Church.²¹ Matthew presented this time by, through Jesus, “redefining Israel”. For Matthew;

“Historical Israel is no longer religious Israel. The church is the true Israel. It does replace historical Israel, but neither are they identical. Since Jesus is Messiah, the fulfillment and completion of God’s revelation in the Jewish Scriptures, those who believe him to be Messiah are true Israelites. That can include Jews but does not necessarily do so. Jesus defines true Israel. Belonging to Israel is not an accident of birth but the consequence of faith in Jesus Messiah. Those who accept him as Son of God are the holy people of God”.²²

The term “Nazarene” was a powerful component in this redefinition process. Through a masterful linguistic device, Matthew echoed popular historical and theological themes which were foundational to Israel and fundamental to Israelite and Jewish theology. Matthew, in this process, redirects the perspective of the early Jewish Christians. The Jews of the First Century were bound to the Law; all actions were measured by the standard of the Mosaic Covenant and Davidic glory. Matthew recognizes the importance of these, and other, benchmarks of Jewish history. However, he insists that now actions not be seen in light of these elements but these elements must now be seen through the light of Jesus’ Cross

²⁰ McKenzie, *Dictionary*, 555.

²¹ Nickle, 99.

²² *Ibid.*, 117.

and Resurrection; Jesus' messiahship. Matthew's free application of Scripture is part of his redefinition process.

CONCLUSIONS

The term, "Nazarene", embodies Matthew's efforts at redefining Israel and reflects a core feature of his theology. The image of Samson looms heavily on Matthew 2:23, as the birth account in the Samson narratives (Judges 13:5) is the only Old Testament text to match this phrase. This term illustrates how Matthew saw not only Jesus fulfilling Scripture but saw Scripture anticipating Jesus. Matthew looked the expanse of the scriptural word and saw the embedded message in these words as finding completion in Jesus. As a Jew, he understood that a word, *dabar* in Hebrew, was a living and dynamic entity that did not die until it was completely fulfilled. In Jesus, Matthew saw that the trajectories of the prophecies went beyond immediate historical circumstance and found a final culmination.

The term, Nazarene, typifies this approach. In his birth account, we see Mary and Joseph completing the archetypes found in Scripture, particularly the Samson narratives. As with Manoah in the Samson birth account, the actions of Joseph are the point of focus. Also, Matthew makes the Law, Numbers 30, an archetype for Joseph. Mary, like the mother of Samson, was approached by the angel and given the announcement. Samson's mother serves as a literary and theological archetype of Mary.

Jesus, however, represented a different type of time and being for Matthew. Samson was not archetypal of Jesus. Although not archetypal, Samson prefigured Jesus in several ways; as a Child of Promise, the Charisma, and in his death. Jesus, for Matthew, represented a singular time in the unfolding of history and therefore moved beyond the archetypes of Scripture. This singular moment demanded a free application of Scripture. Therefore, prophetic words found in the Samson narratives could be seen to foretell Jesus.

Some may question if it is defensible to give the term, Nazarene, so much weight. To this fair question, we would say that yes it is fair to attribute so much weight to the term because we are following the lead of Matthew. By virtue of the construction of the phrase it echoes the image of Samson. By the wordplay on "branch" it fulfills the Isaiah prophecy of David. It occupies a climactic spot in the

birth account, setting the stage for John the Baptist. Matthew looked to the expanse of Scripture to show what was fulfilled in Jesus. Matthew seemed to intend to bring up images and prophecies that were popular and well-known. In this way Matthew could produce an economical and efficiently constructed birth account. The term, Nazarene, played a key role in the birth account which was the introduction and summary of the message that would be illustrated in the chapters that followed and by the ministry of Jesus Christ.

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