

Running head: JESUS THE NAZARENE IN MATTHEW 2:23

1

A Holistic Approach to Jesus the Nazarene in Matthew 2:23

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Abstract

In Matthew 2:23 Jesus is said to have fulfilled what the prophets spoke when he and his family moved to Nazareth, that he shall be called a Nazarene. Due to the uniqueness of this term and the town of Nazareth being found nowhere in the Old Testament, multiple views have been proposed. These views include Jesus of the despised town of Nazareth, Jesus as a Nazirite, and Jesus as the branch from Isaiah 11:1. Each of these views propose their own interpretation of this Old Testament citation. However, these views often do not acknowledge the possibility of multiple meanings intended by Matthew, thus ignoring the depth and purpose behind Matthew's portrayal of Jesus as the one who fulfills the Old Testament Scriptures.

A Holistic Approach to Jesus the Nazarene in Matthew 2:23

Introduction

Matthew 2:23 has been the subject of confusion and debate because of the lack of clarity in its reference. The verse is found at the end of Matthew's birth narrative of Jesus. In this passage, he has shown again and again how Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament scriptures. However, the confusion for verse 23 is rooted in the unknown prophecy Jesus is fulfilling according to Matthew. There is an introductory formula that would normally signify a direct citation, but an Old Testament quotation is lacking. Many direct citations are introduced by an introductory formula.¹ However, here Matthew says that Jesus' family moved to Nazareth to fulfill this prophecy, but the exact prophetic quotation he is referring to is not known to the modern-day reader. Therefore, scholars have proposed different Old Testament passages and even broad themes that they believe Matthew was referring to.

There are three predominant views that scholars have subscribed to and written about. First, that Matthew's reference to Jesus being called a Nazarene is in reference to the town of Nazareth, stated earlier in the verse, which was despised by the Jews. This view suggests that Nazareth was a lowly first-century town in Israel; thus, showing that Jesus is the reviled Messiah the Old Testament predicts. Another view suggests that Matthew is using a play on words with the Greek word for Nazarene and the Hebrew word for root or branch from Isaiah 11:1. This claim is based on the messianic context of the Isaiah passage. A third view suggests that Matthew is referring to Jesus as a

¹ G.K. Beale, *Handbook on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 29.

fulfillment of Judges 13:5 and Samson the Nazirite. This view might suggest some kind of typological link between Jesus and Samson, and that Jesus is the fulfillment of this Old Testament person and theme. The basic conclusion within the variants of this view is that Matthew is portraying Jesus as the Holy One of God.

Overall, each view has its weaknesses, and there are scholars who point them out. Some arguments are stronger than others and deserve more attention, which is why these three views are the predominant ones briefly described here. Despite the weaknesses of a view, more attention and study of them needs to be given here to gain a better understanding of what Matthew may have meant in this verse. One theory, either ignored or not written about, is the idea that through this verse Matthew culminates the birth narrative's thesis that Jesus is the fulfillment of all things. Is it possible that Matthew is not referencing a particular verse or theme, but multiple? In light of the three predominant views, it may be possible that Matthew encapsulates them all, thus providing an ending to the birth narrative with a sentence full of deep meaning about the Messiah.

New Testament Context

The entire Gospel of Matthew portrays Jesus in the light of the Scriptures or as Christians would call it, the Old Testament. The Gospel of Matthew contains “pervasive use of the Old Testament” which leads many scholars to “note the Jewish orientation of this Gospel.”² Based on this, “the first readers were Jewish Christians,” which is deduced

² David Turner, *The Gospel of Matthew, Cornerstone Biblical Commentary* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2005), 13.

by the use of the Old Testament.³ Therefore, Matthew uses the Scriptures to present Jesus as the one whom the Jews were anticipating. Not only was Jesus anticipated by the Jewish people, but he also accomplished so much for them as the Messiah. If Matthew, a Jewish Christian, believes Jesus is the Messiah, then the Scriptures are the best evidence he has for Jesus' messiahship. "The essential key to all Matthew's theology is that in Jesus all God's purposes have come to fulfillment."⁴ Jesus is the fulfillment of all things in the Scriptures, which is why Matthew writes this Gospel to Jews. "For Matthew, Jesus' birth is part of a predetermined plan that prophecies have predicted."⁵ Therefore, the citation of such prophecies is evidence presented by Matthew to not only prove Jesus as Messiah, but to also show God's providential plan. God is revealed in the patterns of his plan, which Matthew presents in this Gospel.

The verse is found within the birth narrative of Jesus, specifically at the end of this narrative about Jesus' early life. The text leading up to the verse's paragraph is full of Old Testament references including quotations and typology. It seems that the birth narrative is the foundation of Matthew's presentation of Jesus as the fulfillment of the Scriptures. This section of the birth narrative acts as a number of proofs to establish Jesus as the Messiah. Who could fulfill all things? One of the line of David (1:1-17), conceived by the Holy Spirit and birthed by a virgin (1:18, 23), born in Bethlehem (2:5), out of

³ Donald Hagner, *Matthew 1-13, World Biblical Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1993), lxiv.

⁴ R. T. France, *Matthew, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), 38.

⁵ Kenneth R. R. Gros Louis, *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives* vol. 2 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1982), 284.

Egypt (2:15), and called a Nazarene (2:23). This narrative is rich in promise/fulfillment literature. Matthew is presenting Jesus as this fulfillment, and as the one who would die, be resurrected, and be the reason for the reader to change their way of life. Of course, he would include this account of Jesus' birth to further qualify him as the one who is the Messiah. This paragraph containing the verse being studied fits in the text as evidence to the fulfillment found in Jesus.

Following verse 23, Matthew transitions to the ministry of John the Baptist. John's ministry in the wilderness of Judea becomes another proof of Jesus' messiahship, but seems to be the next section after the birth narrative. Many commentaries consider verse 23 to end the birth narrative and chapter three to move on. In Hagner's outline for example, Matthew 2:23 is the last verse within the "birth and infancy narratives" followed by Matthew 3:1-4:11 which he calls "the preparation for the ministry."⁶

Messianic Expectations

Who were the Jews anticipating? There was definitely some kind of messianic expectation within Judaism around the time of Jesus, but there was diversity between different sects of Judaism. Bird says there was no uniform belief within Judaism towards the Messiah.⁷ Regardless of exactly who or what the Jews were anticipating, they were ready for something or someone promised in the Old Testament. The Scriptures were "set within a messianic trajectory."⁸ This further explains why Matthew wrote with the

⁶ Hagner, *Matthew*, 43.

⁷ M. F. Bird, *Are You the One Who is to Come?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 26.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 46.

purpose that he did. The Jewish people needed to be shown from their own Scripture that Jesus is the one whom the Scriptures are about.

Additionally, Messianic expectations are not limited to the Old Testament Scriptures. As Bird stated, there was a diversity of Messianic expectation in the first century. Within the Jewish Pseudepigrapha, four documents contain “major references to the Messiah.”⁹ One of these references comes from the Psalm of Solomon 17:21-33. “In summation, the Messiah will be the prefect king, who shall guide a people who will embody the truth that ‘the Lord himself is our king forever more.’”¹⁰ Also, 1 Enoch 37-71 contains the names “Elect One, the Righteous One, the Messiah, and the Son of Man” as “different titles for the same messianic and eschatological figure.”¹¹ All of these references from the Jewish Pseudepigrapha provide a glimpse into the widespread yet diverse messianic expectations during the first century.

The Pseudepigrapha is not the only source within Jewish literature around the first century that contains messianic expectations. The Qumran Dead Sea Scrolls also speak of Messiah, but instead of one, the scrolls speak of two messiahs.¹² One of these Messiahs was the expectation of “a conquering royal messiah” which “appears to be entirely consistent with Jewish messianic and eschatological traditions from” Qumran times to the

⁹ J.H. Charlesworth, *Judaisms and their Messiahs*, eds. Jacob Neusner, Willam S. Green, and Ernest Frerichs (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 234.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 236-237.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 240.

¹² Craig A. Evans, *Israel's Messiah in the Bible and Dead Sea Scrolls*, eds. Richard S. Hess and M. Daniel Carroll (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 94-95.

rabbi years later.¹³ The second Messiah was a “priestly Messiah” who would not only “accompany the messianic king but also dominate him,” which fits into the Qumran sects’ desire to raise up the priesthood and lower all others.¹⁴ The Qumran scrolls again provide further content to the messianic expectation around the time period of Jesus.

Overall, messianic expectations were widespread, but diverse around the time of Jesus. Matthew’s Jewish readers were likely aware of or even subscribed to some of these beliefs. The writings within Judaism around this time period provide evidence of this.

Jesus from Despised Nazareth

The view that this text is referring to Jesus from Nazareth roots itself in the Old Testament not through a particular verse, but through an overall theme or teaching. This view suggests that the verse is proving Jesus to be the despised and reviled Messiah predicted in the Old Testament. Nazareth or Nazarene is never mentioned in the Old Testament, which only adds to the confusion scholars face. The verse states that Jesus living in “a city called Nazareth” is the action that fulfills what the prophets spoke. If Nazareth is never mentioned in the Old Testament, how could this fulfill anything the prophets spoke? Scholars suggest that Nazareth had a derogatory or negative connotation to it based on Nathanael’s comment in John 1.

What Old Testament basis is there for a despised Messiah? Due to the plurality of “prophets” in Matthew 2:23, this view proposes that the idea of a hated Messiah is referring to many prophecies. Rydelnik argues that Matthew is “summarizing the Old

¹³ Ibid., 98.

¹⁴ Charlesworth, *Judaisms*, 230.

Testament teaching that the Messiah was to be despised” and “was not referring to a specific quotation but a general idea.”¹⁵ Although there may not be one particular verse, where could this idea or theme been rooted? Isaiah 53:3 says, “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.” Christians have interpreted Isaiah 53 messianically. “Matthew evidently saw a connection between the Galileans, who were despised and rejected by the Jews, and the One spoken of in Isaiah 53:3.”¹⁶ Much of Isaiah, specifically 52:13-53:12, speaks to this theme of the Suffering Servant whom Christians identify as Jesus. Isaiah is not the only prophet that prophesies about the Messiah in this way. “Zechariah speaks of Israel esteeming her future messianic king with the value of a dead slave.”¹⁷ This view does not argue that Matthew is specifically referencing these verses, but that he is referencing the Old Testament idea of a despised Messiah. These verses given are solely to show that the idea can be found in the Scriptures.

One piece of evidence used by proponents of this view is the account of Nathanael’s reaction to Jesus being from Nazareth in John’s Gospel. In John 1, Philip identified the Messiah as “Jesus of Nazareth” to Nathanael. In response, “Nathanael said to him, ‘Can anything good come out of Nazareth?’” Was Nathanael’s response premeditated? Was Nazareth a despised or rejected town in Israel? This text alone cannot

¹⁵ Michael Rydelnik, *The Messianic Hope: Is the Hebrew Bible Really Messianic?* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing, 2010), 110.

¹⁶ J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), 73.

¹⁷ Rydelnik, *The Messianic Hope*, 110-111.

prove whether or not Nazareth had a certain reputation among first-century Jews in Israel. However, based on the text, it does seem that Nathanael, a Jew, was surprised that something or someone good like the Messiah would come from this town. Rydelnik adds that in “the only other place Matthew uses ‘Nazarene,’ it is used in a derogatory way (Matt 26:71).”¹⁸ Based on these biblical accounts of Nazareth, and the term Nazarene, there seems to be a negative connotation attached.

Additionally, past scholarship supports the idea of the Galilean region being viewed as inferior by other Jews. “The Galileans were despised by the proud Judæans.”¹⁹ Supposedly, the Judeans thought of themselves as a higher value than Galileans. Judeans considered themselves superior because they lived “in or near the holy city, amidst the schools of the Rabbis, and under the shadow of the Temple,” and also “assumed superior knowledge of the Law, and greater purity as a member of a community nearly wholly Jewish,” causing them to look down upon their “Galilæan brethren.”²⁰ If this is the culture within Judaism at the time of Jesus, this view’s claim is grounded on real evidence.

Outside of the Gospels, there seems to be little evidence about Judean distaste for Galileans or those from Nazareth. Bart Ehrman claims that scholars have known for a long time that “Nazareth is never mentioned in the Hebrew Bible, in the writings of

¹⁸ Rydelnik, *The Messianic Hope*, 110.

¹⁹ David Smith, *The Days of His Flesh* (New York: Doran, 1910), 16.

²⁰ Cunningham Geike, *The Life and Words of Christ* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1896), 297.

Josephus, or in the Talmud.”²¹ This can be further confirmed by France who says Nazareth does not appear in any non-Christian text until an inscription that lists “priestly courses in the third or fourth century A.D.”²² The lack of sources outside the Gospels does not help the case for the view that Nazareth had a certain reputation within Judaism. Although Matthew and John are Jews, their few verses about Nazareth and Nazarene cannot concretely prove a widespread mindset within Judaism. Can scholars really conclude that Nazareth was a despised town because of the Gospels’ account? The proponents of this view for 2:23 would answer yes to that question.

Scholars who support this view include Carson and France. Both of these scholars contribute to the conversation for this view. Carson says that the term Nazarene was a despised symbol which was used post-resurrection by unbelievers “to label the Christians in a sneering way,” as a sect, which can be seen in Acts 24:5.²³ France gives an extensive amount of Scriptural references to prove the previously explained prophetic expectation of a Messiah who is lowly and disdained. He also incorporates the idea that the Messiah would come from an “unexpected” place, which is a view of Jews at Jesus’ time according to John 7:27, which says, “when the Christ appears, no one will know where he comes from.”²⁴ These ideas presented by France seem to further the evidence for the

²¹ Bart Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?: The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Harper One, 2012), 193.

²² R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew, New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 92.

²³ D.A. Carson, *God with Us* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1985), 19.

²⁴ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 95.

despised Messiah from Nazareth view and provide support from a scholar of the Gospel of Matthew.

Overall, the strength of this view is the explanation of Matthew using the plural form, prophets, in his introductory phrase to signify summary fulfillment. Considering the breadth of prophecy Matthew portrays Jesus fulfilling, it is logical that the end of the birth narrative would culminate with a more widely encompassing prophecy about the Messiah. One suggests the weaknesses of this view lie in the “absence of any textual correspondence to an OT text” and the connection between the Nazarene term and derision.²⁵ While this view’s explanation of these things has been surveyed, scholars still disagree on whether or not these evidences are sufficient as proof. France sums this up well, saying, “No solution to the exegetical problem posed by 2:23 is straightforward.”²⁶ This is why a scholar could list these things as the strengths of this view, but another person could list them as the weaknesses of the view.

Jesus and Nazirite

Supporters of this view argue for some kind of either allusion or typological connection between the Old Testament and Jesus. This view gets into the more technical side of this discussion by studying how the Hebrew and Greek affects the interpretation of the verse. Ultimately, a connection is made between the idea of a Nazirite or Holy One in the Old Testament and Jesus as the Holy One in the New Testament. While there are

²⁵ Anthony Caffey, “Matthew 2:23 and the Use of the Old Testament: Christ as Nazirite/Judge/Deliverer Par Excellence” (PhD diss., Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 2015), 31, accessed January 27, 2018, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1719668281>.

²⁶ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 95.

some variations within this view, the predominant connection within the view is between Jesus and the Holy One of God through a wordplay. This wordplay was “a standard and accepted form of argumentation in both Jewish and Greco-Roman rhetoric.”²⁷

Davies and Allison’s support and evidence for this view has provided even more explanation for the original language than the previous view. The previously stated plural form of prophets in the passage is addressed by this view and used as evidence for a different reading than normal. When commenting on this one-time occurrence of “προφητῶν,” Davies and Allison suggest that “Matthew alerts us to expect something other than the verbatim quotation of one particular Scripture: he is not just reproducing an OT text.”²⁸ Other views also recognize this to be true. The difference in this prophetic introductory formula should not be left unexplained. Prophets is not the only word changed in this particular introductory formula. Instead of the usual Greek word “λέγοντος” used in other formulas, this verse uses “ὅτι” which adds to the anomaly of the verse’s formula.²⁹

How does Jesus of Nazareth connect to the idea of a Nazirite of the Scriptures? This view suggests a play on words by Matthew, specifically between Nazirite and Nazarene.³⁰ How does this view explain the unique introductory formula? “The plural

²⁷ Craig Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 114.

²⁸ Dale Allison and W.D. Davies, *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew, International Critical Commentary* (New York: T&T Clark, 2000), 275.

²⁹ Maarten Menken, “The Sources of the Old Testament Quotation in Matthew 2:23,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 120, no. 3 (Fall 2001): 451.

³⁰ Allison and Davies, *Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, 277.

‘prophets’ is often explained in this proposal as indicating the former prophets, to which the book of Judges belongs.”³¹ Now there is a prophetic fulfillment being shown between Isaiah and Judges. These multiple prophets could explain the unique formula used by Matthew. “The introductory formula of Matt 2:23a strongly suggests that the evangelist intends to give a real OT quotation, so we have to look for the OT passage or combination of passages from which he quoted.”³² What other passages could this be?

Judges 13 is a passage that some have considered to be the Scripture Matthew quoted. Judges 13:5 in the Septuagint is “remarkably close in wording: ὅτι ἡγιασμένον ναζιραῖον ἔσται” to the New Testament Greek in 2:23 which says, “ὅτι Ναζωραῖος κληθήσεται.”³³ It is clear there is some differentiation between these two verses. Matthew uses the omega instead of the iota that Judges uses. If this is one of the passages that is being quoted by Matthew, what else is he quoting? Menken actually denies the idea of multiple passages, and attributes the change in introductory formula to the source difference:

If Matthew wished to quote from Judg 13:5, 7, that is, from the former prophets, it was only natural for him to write "by the prophets," in the plural. It was also natural for him to omit the participle λεγόντων, "when they said": the prophets meant by him did not utter oracles, as the latter prophets did, but they wrote history. All other fulfillment quotations come from the latter prophets, and therefore have a participle of λέγειν; this one comes from the former prophets, and therefore lacks such a participle.³⁴

The change is a result of different groups of prophets being quoted.

³¹ Menken, “The Sources,” 459.

³² Ibid., 460.

³³ Caffey, “Matthew 2:23,” 35.

³⁴ Menken, “The Sources,” 467.

Davies and Allison say the connection is made based upon the “equation of ‘Nazirite’ and ‘holy one of God’” in the Septuagint and “the substitution of ‘Nazirite’ for ‘holy’ in Isa 4:3.”³⁵ If “Nazirite” and “holy” were considered synonyms, then a wordplay between Nazirite and Nazarene is a way of calling Jesus holy. In Mark 1:24 Jesus is referred to in this way when a man with an unclean spirit said, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God.” The idea that Jesus is the Holy One of God, which can be shown as a synonym to Nazirite, is the Old Testament idea suggested here.

What is the thesis or argument provided by this view outside of answering the introductory phrase? Many scholars supporting this view believe Matthew is using typology here. Caffey suggests three similarities between Jesus’ birth narrative in Matthew and Samson’s in Judges, including a parent being told their child to be born would be a savior, the birth being proclaimed by an angel of God, and the birth being supernatural.³⁶ These similarities and Matthew’s prophetic-fulfillment style are the bases for this view.

The Old Testament context to Judges 13:5 is a narrative of Manoah and his wife who was barren. An angel of the Lord appeared to her telling her that she would conceive and that this child would be a Nazirite who would begin saving Israel from the Philistines that oppressed Israel. In Numbers 6, the Law addresses the rules of a Nazirite, who “committed himself to three abstentions: (1) from wine or any other intoxicating drink;

³⁵ Allison and Davies, *Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, 277.

³⁶ Caffey, “Matthew 2:23,” 33-34.

(2) from having his hair cut; (3) from contact with a corpse.”³⁷ The angel gave the rules of the Nazirite with the additional requirement that “no razor shall come upon his head.” This verse being suggested as the reference for Matthew 2:23 comes in the midst of Samson’s birth narrative, specifically within the promise of God to Samson’s mother given by the angel of the Lord.

Although the linguistic study by this view gives it strength, it also creates weaknesses. For Judges 13:5, the quotation is not exact. Why would Matthew change parts of the phrase if he is referring to that passage? Caffey acknowledges these weaknesses including Matthew’s change in spelling and change in verbs from “ἔσται to κληθήσεται.”³⁸ These linguistic differences need explanation. Another weakness for this view proposed by many scholars is the lifestyle of Jesus. Although some might attempt to show how Jesus did things that could be interpreted as him fulfilling Nazirite vows, there are even more events that show him to not be a Nazirite. “Did he not touch a dead girl’s body (Matt 9:23-25)? “Indeed, Jesus’ lifestyle was anything but the Nazirite ethic espoused in Num 6.”³⁹ Suggestions that attempt to answer these issues will be addressed later.

Jesus as the Branch

The view that Jesus the Nazarene is referring to the idea of the Messiah as a branch or shoot from Jesse is grounded in Isaiah 11:1. This verse says, “There shall come

³⁷ Daniel Block, *Judges, Ruth, New American Commentary* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing, 1999), 403.

³⁸ Caffey, “Matthew 2:23,” 37.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 38.

forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.” In the English translation, this supposed citation is not visible. The original languages have to be shown in order to see the play on words that this view suggests is the case in Matthew 2:23. The Greek word Matthew uses that is translated Nazarene is “Ναζωραῖος” which is a play on words with the Hebrew word “nēṣer” shown in its transliterated form here. “Phonetically, the Hebrew of *Naṣrat* (Nazareth) and *nēṣer* have the same middle consonant.”⁴⁰ This view supports the idea of a play on words by Matthew whose Gospel would have been spoken thus resulting in a knowledge of this play on words in the community.⁴¹

The Old Testament context is very helpful in understanding this view and its basis for finding Isaiah 11:1 to be the citation of Matthew 2:23. “The occasion for the book of Isaiah was the Assyrian crisis, which would bring about the destruction of Northern Israel and threaten the existence of Southern Judah.”⁴² This book was written to a people during a time of uncertainty and worry. It is known that the Assyrians dragged the Northern kingdom off into exile. Assyria was very powerful and even attacked Jerusalem during the reign of Hezekiah. In the midst of this fear from the people of Judah, Isaiah the prophet ministered to the people. Therefore, one of the main themes in Isaiah is of a

⁴⁰ Donald Hagner, *Matthew 1-13, World Biblical Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1993), 41.

⁴¹ Hagner, *Matthew*, 42.

⁴² John Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1-39, New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 28.

messianic hope, structurally divided into three categories of “the King (chapters 1-37), the Servant (chapter 38-55), and the Anointed Conqueror (chapters 56-66).”⁴³

The verse being studied is found within a messianic passage, in which “Isaiah extends the remnant the hope of the royal Messiah.”⁴⁴ The previous chapter speaks of the remnant of Israel and that God’s wrath will result in Assyria’s destruction in the future. Isaiah 11:1-16 concludes what the previous chapter spoke of and presents the Messiah as a ruling king “in whose hands the concerns of the weakest will be safe.”⁴⁵ Although Assyria had military power, God is the one with the supernatural power. He is illustrating this truth to Judah by promising the Messiah who is to come. In verse 11:1 the prophet continues the illustration of both Assyria and Israel being reduced to stumps from chapter 10, but also adds the hope that from one of the stumps a shoot will come forth and restore.⁴⁶ This shoot or root from Jesse refers to the Messiah and the family from which he would be born.⁴⁷

A future branch is spoken of in other places in the Old Testament. Jeremiah 23:5 says, “Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.” Also, the prophet Zechariah speaks of a branch. Zechariah 6:12 says, “And say to him, ‘Thus says the Lord of hosts, ‘Behold, the man whose name

⁴³ Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 13.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁴⁵ Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah*, 277.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 278.

⁴⁷ Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, 121.

is the Branch: for he shall branch out from his place, and he shall build the temple of the Lord.” Although these verses outside of Isaiah do not use the same Hebrew word “nēšer,” they do speak of a similar “branch or root.”⁴⁸ The words “form a unified concept in looking to the fulfillment of the promises, and the mention of one doubtless brought the others to mind automatically.”⁴⁹ This recurring theme seems to be this view’s explanation of the plurality of prophets in Matthew’s introductory formula.

Isaiah 11:1 can be found within some passages in the Dead Sea Scrolls. In 1QH 6 and 7, “neser is used in reference to the chosen community of Qumran, so that the word had an eschatological significance in God’s plan of salvation.”⁵⁰ One psalm within the scrolls of psalms “describes the eschatological role of the sect as a small plant which will grow into a large tree.”⁵¹ These passages may not explicitly quote the Isaiah passage, but do use the same word for root or branch that Isaiah uses in 11:1. Additionally, “The Isaiah Targum explicitly interprets the neser as the Messiah.”⁵² Isaiah 11:1 reads, “And a king shall come forth from the sons of Jesse, and the Messiah shall be exalted from the sons of his sons.”⁵³ It seems that even within Jewish circles this verse is interpreted to be Messianic.

⁴⁸ Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 41.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁵⁰ Raymond Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 212.

⁵¹ Devorah Dimant, *Jewish Writings of the Second Temple Period*, ed. Michael Stone (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1984), 524.

⁵² France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 92.

⁵³ Bruce Chilton, trans., *The Isaiah Targum* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1987), 28.

This context is attested in early church history through the writings of Jerome “who cites the second line of the Isaian verse thus: ‘... and from his root will grow (the) Nazorean.’”⁵⁴ Luz also confirms this interpretation by Jerome.⁵⁵ This interpretation of this citation by Jerome provides further evidence for this view.

The Messianic context presented here provides the strength of this view’s argument. However, this view is not free of weaknesses. One weakness is the use of “nēšer” throughout the rest of the Old Testament. This word “occurs only four times in the Hebrew Bible,” with the other three passages not being Messianic.⁵⁶ While there are other Messianic passages translated as “branch” into English, they do not use the word “nēšer.” The Hebrew word “šemah” translated “branch” is used messianically, such as in the previously stated Jeremiah 23:5 passage.⁵⁷ Therefore, while the branch theme may span multiple books in the Old Testament, the word “nēšer” does not remain consistent with this theme. Additionally, the Septuagint translates the Hebrew for “nēšer” to “ἄνθος” thus terminating “the linguistic connection for Greek speakers” which Matthew’s context primarily was.⁵⁸ However, the response from this view was briefly stated earlier in the idea that the oral reading of this text may have helped the original audience notice the play on words. Also possible would be that the purpose or explanation of this citation was passed along with the reading of the book.

⁵⁴ Brown, *Birth*, 211.

⁵⁵ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1-7* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), 123.

⁵⁶ Brown, *Birth*, 212.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 212.

⁵⁸ Caffey, “Matthew 2:23,” 28.

Discussion between the Views

Since the views have now been surveyed, each one needs to interact with the others in order for one to study more deeply into this scriptural issue. While these views differ on their interpretation of this verse, common ground can be found. The first conclusion all these views agree upon is that the primary meaning of Nazarene is that Jesus is from Nazareth. All other explanations of the verse are providing a secondary meaning or allusion that the author intended. Clearly, the despised Nazareth view believes that this verse is clarifying that Jesus is from Nazareth. The secondary meaning for the despised Nazareth is that the Messiah being despised fulfills the prophet's words. The Jesus as Nazirite and Holy One of God view also believes that the primary meaning is about Jesus of Nazareth. Allison and Davies explain this by using Mark 1:24, concluding that "Jesus of Nazareth" and "Holy One of God" prove to be "in parallel" showing that Jesus is from Nazareth.⁵⁹ Caffey also concedes that "regardless of what else *Ναζωραῖος κληθήσεται* means, at first level it means that Jesus was from Nazareth."⁶⁰ Hagner also says that Matthew "associates the title with the name of Jesus' hometown Nazareth, despite the phonetic difficulty of transliterating" the letters of the original languages.⁶¹ Albright's work on this topic has led to further evidence that Nazarene primarily refers to Nazareth. One argument of Albright's even outside of his technical work on this subject is the idea that:

⁵⁹ Allison and Davies, *Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, 276.

⁶⁰ Caffey, "Matthew 2:23," 6.

⁶¹ Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 40.

Since place-names in a closely knit geographical district influence one another considerably, owing to the fact that their inhabitants not only speak the same dialect as a rule, but are also in constant touch with one another, it is generally wise to examine all toponymic elements from a given district before going elsewhere for the explanation of anomalies.⁶²

This work from Albright is significant because it provides evidence for Nazareth being the primary meaning of the term Nazarene. Albright's argument is that instead of searching for a far-reaching explanation, one should consider this immediate evidence about place-names.

Thus, an understanding of the common belief about Nazareth as the primary meaning of Nazarene provides a better basis for further discussion. But the question remains, how do these different views interact? What issues are created in the search for a solution? The view of Jesus being from the despised town of Nazareth logically fits well with the other views because it is not adding further interpretive ideas to the common ground. The view simply adds an Old Testament theme about the Messiah to the geographical aspect this verse presents. When considered with other views, no issues are really created. One could hold to the views that Nazarene refers to Nazareth as despised and represents a play on words with Isaiah 11:1 simultaneously. Both present Jesus as the Messiah rooted in Old Testament truth, and do not contradict one another. Further, according to Wilkins, "the returning founders of the village were apparently from the line of David and gave the settlement a consciously messianic name. They connected the

⁶² William Albright, "The Names 'Nazareth' and 'Nazorean'," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 65 (December 1946): 398.

establishment of the town with the hope of the coming messianic *neser*.”⁶³ This argument concludes that Nazarene refers to both Nazareth and the Messianic Branch. If these two views could be cooperative, how do they interact with the view of Jesus and Judges 13:5? If the basis of the view is to present Jesus as the holy one of God, no contradictions seem to arise. Whether or not there is prophecy that predicts the Messiah to be holy is another discussion. Jesus as holy is not inaccurate, but truth. Therefore, it seems that no view proves its superiority or inadequacy from comparison or contrast. If anything, it proves the possibility of the views being able to each function together in the verse’s meaning. Ultimately, this depends on the author’s intention, which in this case cannot be concretely known. However, the lack of disagreement between the views opens the door to the possibility that Matthew has packed this verse with multiple meanings.

A Holistic Approach

Matthew 2:23 comes at the end of the birth narrative of Jesus. As previously discussed, this birth narrative presents Jesus as the fulfillment of all things. This verse functions as the culmination or the conclusion as the final evidence that Jesus is the Messiah predicted in the Old Testament. Matthew has just shown, potentially typologically, how Jesus has come out of Egypt just as Moses and Israel did. But where would this new Moses, Messiah go to out of Egypt? His family goes and lives in the city of Nazareth. This brings the flow of the text to the Old Testament allusion being studied. Why would Jesus’ family move to Nazareth? The rest of the verse says, “so that what was spoken in the prophets might be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene.” For

⁶³ Michael J. Wilkins, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary*, ed. Clinton E. Arnold (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 21.

some reason, Jesus going to Nazareth fulfills what the prophets said even though the Old Testament never speaks of Nazareth. “Matthew presents words not found in the OT or indeed in any pre-Christian extrabiblical writings known to us.”⁶⁴ Jesus the Nazarene is the fulfillment of the prophets. Throughout the Gospel, Matthew shows how Jesus fulfills different aspects of the Scriptures, such as the law. In this instance, Matthew is showing how Jesus fulfills the words of the prophets.

Summary Fulfillment

With an understanding of Matthew’s purpose to be the presentation of Jesus as the fulfillment of the Scriptures, there is the possibility that 2:23 is not limited to one single allusion. Why would Matthew use this unique citation at the end of the birth narrative? It is possible that Matthew is inviting the reader into a very rich, deep, and broad citation. Multiple scholars have suggested the idea of summary fulfillment, which is very possible.⁶⁵ However, is it possible that Matthew’s intended meaning was to encapsulate all three of the predominant views presented here? If Matthew is culminating the birth narrative so that the reader believes Jesus fulfilled the Scriptures, could his citation have multiple layers? Since most scholars acknowledge Nazareth as the primary allusion in the text and the discussion is about a secondary allusion, it may be possible for a third allusion as well. Maybe Matthew’s citation should not be restricted or limited to one or two allusions. Brown argues that it is possible this verse is “a ‘both ... and,’ rather than an ‘either ... or,’ and we should recognize that Christians may have been attracted by the

⁶⁴ Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 40.

⁶⁵ Rydelnik, *The Messianic Hope*, 109; France, *The Gospel of Matthew* 94-95.

wealth of possible allusions in a term applied to Jesus.”⁶⁶ Thus, the richness of what Matthew might be saying fits into the purpose of his Gospel.

The idea of summary fulfillment may also lead to a holistic view of Matthew 2:23. Rydelnik gives an example of summary fulfillment in the Old Testament through Ezra 9:10-12 where “Ezra’s quotation cannot be found anywhere else in the Hebrew Bible,” but Rydelnik suggests he was “summarizing the teaching found in Deut 11:8-9, Isa 1:19 and Ezek 27:25.”⁶⁷ Not only does this open the door to the potentiality that Isaiah referenced other passages, but it shows that a citation can include multiple passages and themes. If Matthew is using summary fulfillment, he could have been referencing multiple scriptures and themes. Other scholars support the idea that Matthew’s citation was indirect. “The First evangelist thereby suggests that the following quotation is a quotation only in a qualified sense, not a direct but an indirect quotation.”⁶⁸ An indirect quotation allows for summary fulfillment. This kind of prophetic fulfillment is not unprecedented in the New Testament. Rydelnik lists Matthew 26:56, Acts 3:18-24, and Romans 1:2 as other examples of summary fulfillment.⁶⁹ The supporters of the despised Messiah view also uphold that this verse is summary fulfillment because they believe Matthew is referencing the theme that the Messiah would be rejected. However, no explanation is given to explain why the summary fulfillment could not have been used

⁶⁶ Brown, *Birth*, 209.

⁶⁷ Rydelnik, *The Messianic Hope*, 110.

⁶⁸ W. Barnes Tatum, “Matthew 2.23—Wordplay and Misleading Translations,” *Bible Translator* 27 (January 1976): 136.

⁶⁹ Rydelnik, *The Messianic Hope*, 111.

to cite other passages or themes. With the uniqueness of this particular citation, it seems very possible that more was meant by Matthew. He was ending the birth narrative with a very theologically rich verse that shows in multiple ways how Jesus fulfilled the Scriptures.

Assumptions

Some assumptions must be made in order to consider this explanation probable. One assumption is that Matthew, inspired by God, was writing the Word of God here. There was no mistake when he used the term “Ναζωραῖος” to show Jesus’ fulfillment of the Scriptures. He was intentionally using this uncommon word to portray Jesus in the way his writing theologically presented him.

Second, Jesus is prevalent in the Old Testament. In Matthew 5:17 Jesus says, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.” The New Testament has an abundant amount of messianic prophecy/fulfillment verses. The Gospels in particular show a skillfulness when portraying Jesus in this way. Luke 24:27 shows that Jesus himself taught the Scriptures to show how he fulfilled them: “And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.” He was able to reveal himself in the breadth of Scripture.

Studies in Mark

Other occurrences of “Ναζωραῖος” include once more in Matthew, three times in John, and eight times in Luke and Acts. However, a similar word occurs in Mark that

does not occur in Matthew, which is “Nazarēnos.”⁷⁰ As mentioned earlier, in Mark 1:24 Jesus is referred to as a Nazarene and the Holy One of God in the same verse. If Matthew was trying to make this connection, why would he change the spelling? If Matthew pulled subject matter from Mark, is it possible that he wanted to make multiple connections? Edwards says that the title “Holy One of God” is only attributed to one other person in the bible, Samson; thus Mark is likening Jesus to Samson.⁷¹ Mark’s usage of the word is not limited to this one instance. In Mark 14:67 it seems that Nazarēnos could be used in a derogatory way. This verse is found in Peter’s denial of Christ where the servant girl accuses him. Her use of Nazarēnos “is not an especially good omen,”⁷² and “there may be an element of sarcasm” based on its usage in the New Testament.⁷³ Now the connections of the Nazirite view and despised Messiah view have been traced to Mark.

Therefore, Matthew’s differentiation in spelling could account for the nuance that he is adding to the term. “The most likely solution is that we have in both words the same assertion in the form of a derivation from *nšrt*, the only difference being that in *Nazarēnos* we have a pure Gk. formation, whereas in *Nazōraios* an additional Aram. element is used which expresses belonging.”⁷⁴ This explanation could shed light on why

⁷⁰ Brown, *Birth*, 209.

⁷¹ James Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark, Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 57-58.

⁷² Edwards, *Mark*, 450.

⁷³ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark, New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 620.

Matthew changes the spelling of the word. He wants to show that not only is Jesus from Nazareth and the Holy One of God like Samson, but he is also the righteous branch. “It seems only proper to conclude that Matthew brings his story to a close using a term packed with meaning for his audience, referring to a Savior from the humble and ridiculed town of Nazareth, who was nonetheless an heir to Davidic glory, and a child set apart by God for the holiest of tasks.”⁷⁵ While this idea is not concrete in evidences, it provides an explanation for the uniqueness of the verse, its context, and usage, and allows many opportunities for further study.

Conclusions

The possibility of Matthew ending the birth narrative with a sentence full of meaning is intriguing. The basis for this possibility is that Matthew wants to portray Jesus as the fulfillment of the Scriptures throughout his entire Gospel. In the opening scenes, Matthew gives an account of Jesus’ birth. Matthew 2:23 comes at the end of that account, following three other portrayals of Jesus fulfilling the Old Testament. Because of this, questions are raised due to the uniqueness of Matthew 2:23. What is Matthew trying to do with this verse? Why is it so different? Does it mean more than a place-name? These questions can be answered if a holistic approach to the verse is taken. Matthew, a brilliant writer, inspired by God, delivers a verse that speaks to the depth of Jesus’ fulfillment of all the Scripture.

⁷⁴ K. H. Rengstorf, *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* vol. 2, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1976), 334.

⁷⁵ Thomas Graves, “A Story Ignored: An Exegesis of Matthew 2:13–23,” *Faith and Mission* 5 (Fall 1987): 75.

After summarizing each of the predominant views, common ground could still be found. Each of the views generally agrees that the primary explanation of this verse and the word “Nazarene” is that Jesus and his family moved to Nazareth. With the primary allusion identified, the secondary allusion is where the views differ; however, none seem to contradict the others. The idea that Jesus is the Holy One of God does not contradict the idea that he is also the despised Messiah and righteous branch of the Scriptures. This is one of the important conclusions from this study. The possibility of an all-encapsulating intended meaning by Matthew can only be suggested if the views are compatible. Based upon the presentation of the views and their arguments, compatibility is possible.

Another conclusion that can be made is that the usage of the original language not only allows this possibility, but also seems to support it. When comparing Mark and Matthew, there is a difference in the spelling of the word translated “Nazarene.” While this is not a concrete piece of evidence, it can still be concluded that it is possible Matthew changed the spelling to nuance the word, thus adding further meaning to it without taking meaning away. This explains the richness of Matthew’s finale to the birth narrative.

These suggested conclusions also raise questions and areas of further study on this verse. One possible area of further study is Scripture interpreting Scripture. Is it possible that Isaiah was using a play on words in the Hebrew between “nazir” and “neser”? “The Hebrew Bible is the repository of a vast store of hermeneutical techniques

which long preceded early Jewish exegesis.”⁷⁶ If Isaiah was aware of Judges and was inspired by God, could he have been using a play on words as well? While this is speculative, a study of this may be helpful to understanding whether or not the holistic approach is what Matthew intended. If Matthew’s citation was a wordplay on Isaiah who was also using a wordplay on Judges, the holistic approach would be much more grounded in its evidence.

Another area of further study should be the comparison between Mark’s usage and Matthew’s. How does the synoptic problem fit into this difference of spelling and usage? How else does Matthew use Mark’s Gospel to tell the story of Jesus in his own theological way of Jesus fulfilling the Scriptures? Are there other examples of Matthew’s use of Mark similar to the differences found here? Studies in this area would be very beneficial to the understanding of Matthew 2:23 because they could shed light on Matthew’s difference in spelling the word translated Nazarene.

⁷⁶ Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretations in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 14.

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