
FAQ

MESSIANIC APOLOGETICS
www.messianicapologetics.net

Nazarene, Yeshua Called

J.K. McKee revised 13 August, 2019

What specific verse in the Tanach says that Yeshua will be called a “Nazarene”? I could not find any.

Matthew 2:23 records that Yeshua the Messiah “came and lived in a city called Nazareth. *This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophets: ‘He shall be called a Nazarene.’*” The challenge for some interpreters is the fact that no specific text is being quoted. This is not unusual to see in the Apostolic Scriptures by any means. Yeshua Himself says in Matthew 26:54, “How then will the Scriptures be fulfilled, *which say that it must happen this way?*” Here, the Messiah is speaking of the general sense or meaning of the Tanach, not necessarily a specific verse. James 4:5 also says, for example, “Or do you think that the Scripture speaks to no purpose: ‘He jealously desires the Spirit which He has made to dwell in us?’” Here, James appeals to the general sense of Scripture from the Tanach, rather than a specific verse or prophecy.

We see the same thing in Matthew’s Gospel in Matthew 2:23, as it is important for us to keep in mind that Matthew references the “prophets,” indicating that he is appealing to a theological concept evidenced in several places in the Tanach. What is actually being communicated by the statement, “He will be called a Nazorean” (NRSV) has been a cause of great discussion and some debate among Bible interpreters and commentators.

What is likely being communicated by Matthew is some kind of word play on the terms *nazir* (נָזִיר), primarily meaning “(s.one) dedicated, consecrated” (*CHALOT*),¹ by extension “a nazirite,” and the word “Nazarene” (Grk. *Nazōraios*, Ναζωραῖος), meaning someone from the city of Nazareth. An adequate description of a nazirite is given to us in Judges 13:7, where Samson’s mother is told how her son is to live:

“But he said to me, ‘Behold, you shall conceive and give birth to a son, and now you shall not drink wine or strong drink nor eat any unclean thing, for the boy shall be a Nazirite to God from the womb to the day of his death.’”

The Hebrew *ki-nezir Elohim yihyeh* (כִּי-נִזִּיר אֱלֹהִים יִהְיֶה) was rendered two different ways in the Greek Septuagint, both of which would have been extant in the First Century. The LXX(a) version has *naziraion Theou* (ναζιραῖον θεοῦ) or “nazirite of God,” whereas the LXX(b) version has *hagion Theou* (ἅγιον θεοῦ), “holy to God” (LXE). As Tim Hegg notes, “This tells us that from a very early period, well before the 1st Century, the idea of ‘holy one of God’ and ‘Nazirite of God’ were linked through the concurrent translations of Judges into Greek.”² One did not necessarily have to take a “nazirite vow” to be considered a holy person, which there is no record of Yeshua ever doing. In Mark 1:23-24 we see Yeshua being *Nazarēne* (Ναζαρηνέ, adjective) or “of Nazareth” connected to His holiness:

“Just then there was a man in their synagogue with an unclean spirit; and he cried out, saying, ‘What business do we have with each other, Yeshua of Nazareth? Have You come to destroy us? I know who You are—the Holy One of God!’”

¹ *CHALOT*, 232.

² Tim Hegg, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew: Chapters 1-7* (Tacoma, WA: TorahResource, 2007), pp 69-70.

Matthew, seeing this concept referred to in Mark's Gospel, whose audience was largely Roman and would have overlooked any connection between "Nazareth" and "Holy One," is likely expounding upon this for his Jewish audience, possibly using additional source material (probably from what most scholars call "Q"). His Jewish audience would have been familiar with the terms *nazir*, or the Septuagint renderings of *naziraion Theou* or *hagion Theou*. Matthew's emphasis, more than anything else, is to connect the concept of Yeshua being a Nazarene to His holiness. Notably, one does not necessarily have to take a "nazirite vow" to be considered holy, though as Hegg notes, "Yeshua's words at the last Pesach [Passover], that He would not drink of the fruit of the vine until He came into His kingdom, are reminiscent of the Nazirite prohibition against eating or drinking anything from the vine. The same may be said of Yeshua's refusal to accept the wine while on the cross."³

A second, and more commonly proposed view espoused by many Messianics is that Matthew is making some kind of word play on *netzer* (נֶזֶר), meaning "sprout, shoot (of plant)" (*CHALOT*),⁴ or by extension "branch." This would have probably been a commonly known Hebrew word in the First Century among both Jews in Israel and the Diaspora, and *does not* require that Matthew would have had to compose his Gospel in Hebrew. It is commonly connected to prophecies such as Isaiah 11:1:

"Then a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse, and a branch [*netzer*] from his roots will bear fruit."

This prophecy was viewed in a Messianic context by the Jewish Sages, and is appealed to various times by the Apostles (Romans 15:12; 1 Peter 4:14; Revelation 5:5). One of the challenges with holding *exclusively* to this view, though, is the fact that other Messianic prophecies applying to Yeshua employ the Hebrew term *tzemach* (צֶמַח) for "branch":

"Behold, the days are coming," declares the LORD, "When I will raise up for David a righteous Branch [*tzemach*]; and He will reign as king and act wisely and do justice and righteousness in the land" (Jeremiah 23:5).

"In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch [*tzemach*] of David to spring forth; and He shall execute justice and righteousness on the earth" (Jeremiah 33:15).

"Now listen, Joshua the high priest, you and your friends who are sitting in front of you—indeed they are men who are a symbol, for behold, I am going to bring in My servant the Branch [*tzemach*]" (Zechariah 3:8).

"Then say to him, 'Thus says the LORD of hosts, "Behold, a man whose name is Branch [*tzemach*], for He will branch out from where He is; and He will build the temple of the LORD" (Zechariah 6:12).

We can certainly consider the words *netzer* and *tzemach* to be synonyms, as the latter likewise means "growth, what sprouts," "shoot, bud" (*CHALOT*).⁵ This would account for Matthew's reference to "the prophets," as opposed to a singular prophet (cf. Isaiah 11:1). Matthew, more than anything else, relies on his audience's knowledge of knowing that the terms *nazir*, *naziraion*, and "holy one" are all connected with Yeshua being a "Nazarene." The major point that Matthew is emphasizing is that Yeshua has been separated out as the Father's appointed servant and is the ideal of holiness. Hegg validly states, "Yeshua, in all of His life lived out the quintessential meaning of the Nazirite vow, for He was the Holy One of God in every way."⁶ One need not go very far to understand this connection and how it makes Yeshua a "Nazarene."

³ Ibid., 70.

⁴ *CHALOT*, 244.

⁵ Ibid., 307.

⁶ Hegg, *Matthew*, 71.