

"A NAZOREAN SHALL BE CALLED"

UNRAVELING A CHRISTIAN CONUNDRUM



Photo: Garo Nalbandian

Modern Nazareth, with the Church of the Annunciation at center.

We know very little about Jesus' early years. Matthew reports that when Herod the Great received word of the birth of Jesus, the king took steps to eliminate this potential usurper of his throne. The manner in which the Evangelist presents Herod's murderous actions against the young male children in Bethlehem was certainly intended to remind his readers of the harrowing events in the young life of Moses in Egypt (Exod 1:22). Nevertheless, the violent paranoia of Herod described by Matthew corresponds well to the historical portrait of Herod painted by the Jewish historian, Josephus Flavius.



The flight into Egypt (Matt 2:14); 19th century engraving. (illumination: Carta, Jerusalem)

On one occasion Herod put to death a group of Pharisees who prophesied that the throne would be taken from him and his descendants and given to the children of Herod's brother, Pheroras (A.J. 17: 41-45). Tragic domestic intrigues engulfed Herod's final years, and the Judean king eventually executed his Hasmonean wife Miriamme (A.J. 15:218-239; J.W. 1:438-444) and three of his sons (Alexander and Aristobulus: A.J. 16:361-394; J.W. 1:538-551; Antipater: A.J. 182-187; J.W. 1:661-664), all for suspicion of sedition.

It is against this backdrop of looming danger that Joseph was warned in a dream to take his family to Egypt to escape Herod's murderous intentions (Matt 2:13-15). Only when Herod was dead would it be safe to return home. When the Judean king died in his winter palace in Jericho (4 BC), Herod's will divided his kingdom between his surviving sons (A.J. 17:188-190; J.W. 1:664-669). Contrary to Herod's final wishes, Augustus did not award Archelaus his father's throne. He was instead appointed ethnarch of Judea, Idumea and Samaria (J.W. 2:93; A.J. 17:317). Herod Antipas became tetrarch of Galilee and Perea in the Transjordan, while Philip

was appointed tetrarch over an amalgam of districts in the north (Gaulanitis, Trachonitis, Batanaea, Auranitis, Paneas) on the frontier with Syria.

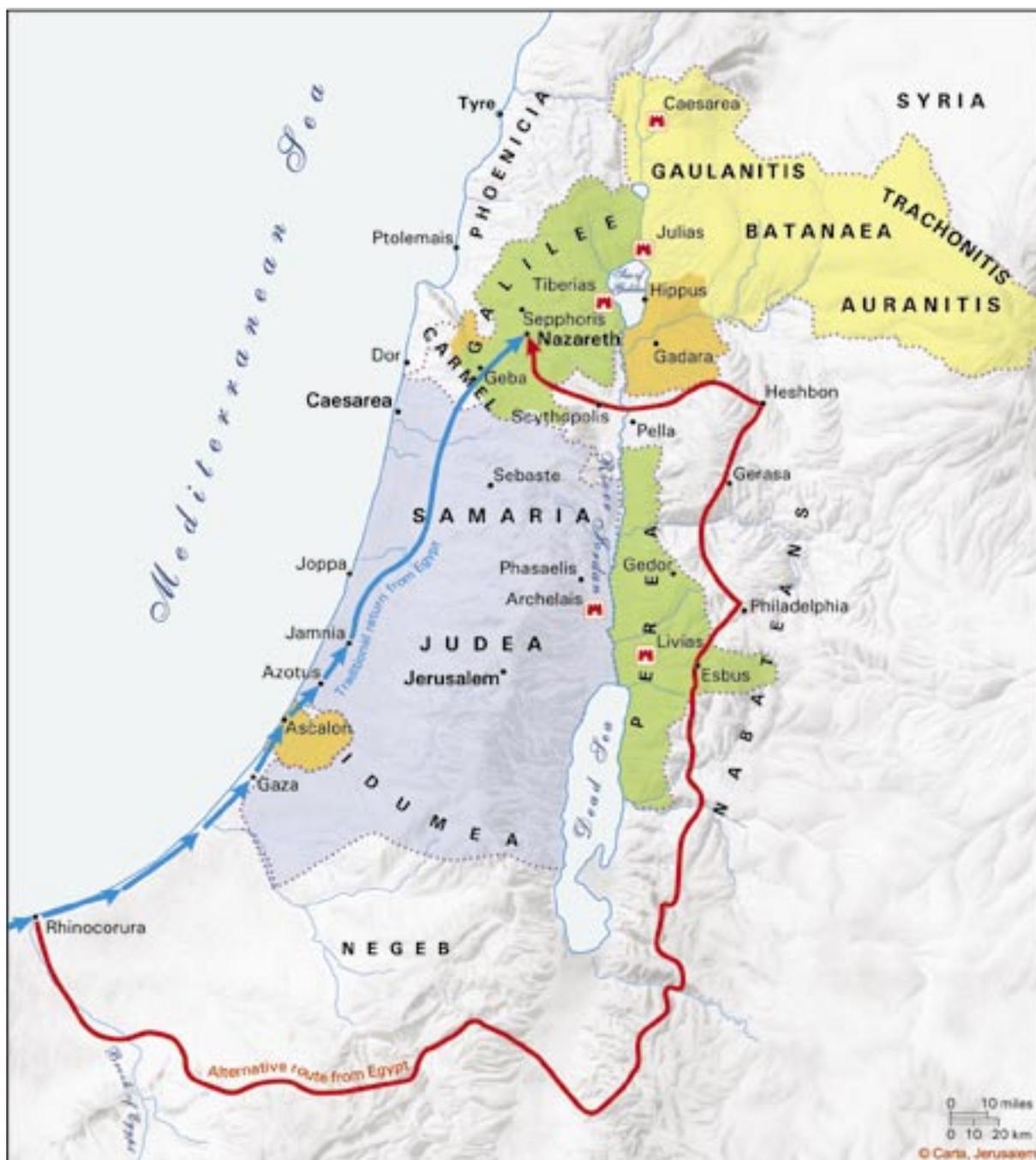
Archelaus exceeded his father's tyranny. The situation became so intolerable that after ten years of Archelaus' rule a delegation of Samaritan and Jewish leaders traveled to Rome to appeal to Caesar Augustus to remove Herod's son (A.J. 17:342-344; J.W. 2:111-113; Geog. 16.2.46; Dio 55.27.6). Augustus investigated the charges, deposed Archelaus to Gaul and appointed a Roman governor to administrate Judea from Caesarea.

At the time we encounter Joseph and his family in Egypt, Judea was still in the throes of Archelaus' cruel grip. According to Matthew, Joseph was warned in another dream not to return to the environs of Jerusalem, which fell under the shadow of the ethnarch's rule (Matt 2:19-22). Instead, Joseph settled in Nazareth, a small, nondescript village perched on a chalky ridge overlooking the Jezreel Valley. Scant attention is given to Joseph's likely geopolitical reason for choosing Nazareth. The remote village lay within the boundary of Galilee, under

THE DIVISION OF HEROD'S KINGDOM

4 BC–AD 6

The traditional route of return takes little account of the warning to avoid the territory of Archelaus. While Matthew does not specify, Joseph may have circumvented these districts and followed the well-known southern route from Rhinocorura at the Brook of Egypt towards Petra (cf. A.J. 14:374; J.W. 1:277). Their journey north beyond the Jordan would then have passed through Perea and approached Nazareth in Galilee from the southeast.



the jurisdiction of Antipas, and beyond the murderous reach of Archelaus.

The story of the heavenly warning and the relocation to Galilee reminded Matthew of the words of the Hebrew prophets.

There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, "He will be called a Nazorean." (NRSV Matt 2:23)

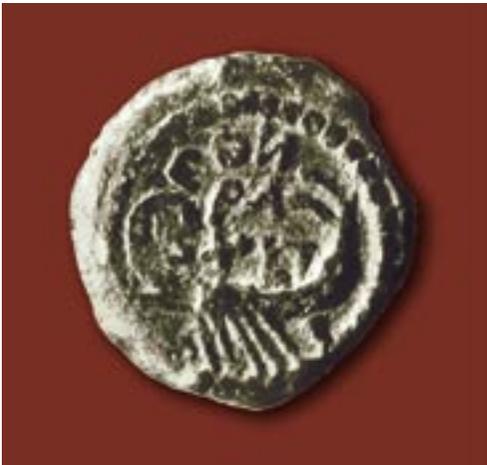
Centuries of Christian readers have pondered the meaning of the Greek term *nazoraïos*, usually rendered Nazarene, and which Old Testament passages Matthew had in mind when he interpreted the relocation to Nazareth as a fulfillment of Scripture. Where in the Hebrew Scriptures

does it expect that the Redeemer will be called a Nazarene or come from Nazareth? Certainly, Nathaniel's retort to Philip's claim—"We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote"—exhibits a jaundiced view of the small Galilean village, "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" (John 1:45–46).

Most modern readers assume that the enigmatic epithet is somehow related to the name of the Galilean village because of the similarities in their spelling, i.e. *nazoraïos* and *nazaret*. So, when the Greek term recurs elsewhere in the New Testament beside Jesus' name, English translations routinely render it as a gen-

tilic adjective, i.e. Jesus of Nazareth (Matt 26:71; Luke 18:37; John 18:5, 7; Acts 2:22; 3:6; 4:10 *et passim*). However, Nazareth never occurs again in conjunction with *nazoraïos*. Is their appearance together in Matthew 2:23 intentional or coincidental? Or stated another way, can it be that the meaning of *nazoraïos* relates to the heavenly warning and Joseph's care to keep Jesus out of harm's way in the remote reaches of Galilee, rather than a play on the name of the village in which Jesus grew up?

Various suggestions have been put forward to identify the Semitic term represented by *nazoraïos*. If we assume that the Greek word accurately characterizes a Hebrew term, then it is important



Coin (reverse side) of Herod Archelaus (4 BC–AD 6) showing a war-galley with oars and cabin at stern.

to recognize that the “o” vowel in the second syllable (*naZORaios*) eliminates the popular Hebrew suggestions, *nezer* (branch) or *nazir* (nazarite). Instead, we should expect a term resembling the Hebrew passive participle *nazor* (one who is protected, kept) with an attached personal pronoun to convey the sense, “One whom I have kept, protected, preserved.”

A ready solution to the riddle of *nazoraïos* has been further obscured by the reading in Matthew of the verb in our verse, “he shall be called.” Most read it to convey the sense “he shall be named.” Yet, Matthew’s style elsewhere in the infancy narratives to name or entitle is different. He uses the fuller Greek expression “to call by the name” (Matt 1:21, 23). Our verse, on the other hand, matches the style of Matthew 2:15, “Out of Egypt I have called my son.” In both these passages from the second chapter of Matthew, the verb “to call” means God has chosen Jesus and charged him with a divinely appointed task.

Of course, God is not mentioned in Matthew 2:23. Grammarians call this Semitic style of expression a “divine passive.” It reflects the reverence of ancient Jewish writers and their reticence to utter God’s name. We can see this penchant in Matthew’s preference for the phrase, “the kingdom of heaven,” in parallel sayings in which the Gentile Luke preserves “the kingdom of God” (Luke 6:20=Matt 5:3; Luke 7:28=Matt 11:11). In our verse, God is assumed to be the subject of the action. Matthew’s elliptical allusion is thus to a prophetic passage that describes

one whom the Lord has kept, protected and called.

The key to identifying which verses Matthew had in mind is to find a passage in which the two verbs “to call” and “to keep” coincide. This style of signaling specific Old Testament verses through the collocation of key words is a peculiar style of ancient Jewish exegesis. The Evangelist’s plural “the prophets” (cp. Matt 1:22; 2:5, 15, 17) suggests that Matthew had more than one prophetic verse in mind. In the Old Testament there are only two verses found among the Hebrew prophets in which the Hebrew verbs to call (*qara*?) and to keep (*nazar*) coincide: Isaiah 42:6 and Jeremiah 31:6.

A cruel son of Herod remained in power in Jerusalem, and it was not yet safe to return. At the angelic warning, Joseph took Mary and Jesus to Nazareth to keep his son safe. Their relocation to the security of this remote Galilean village, where Jesus could grow to adulthood, reminded Matthew of the divine care reflected in the words concerning the Isaianic Servant of the Lord: “I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the nations” (Isa 42:6).

Matthew concludes his abbreviated account of Jesus’ infancy with the allusion to Isaiah in order to imply that Jesus was kept by the Lord until the appointed time for the beginning of his prophetic ministry. The Evangelist intends Isaiah 42:6 also to anticipate the next episode in his record of Jesus’ life—the heavenly call at his baptism (Matt 3:16–17). The heavenly voice borrows words from the same chapter in Isaiah 42 to proclaim the prophetic significance of Jesus’ baptism: “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him” (Isa 42:1).

The scriptural pair from Jeremiah 31:6 forms a literary complex that may be a vestige of a lost homily, “There will be a day when watchmen (*nozrim*) call out on the hills of Ephraim, ‘Come, let us go up to Zion, to the Lord our God.’” We have little information how the Hebrew epithet evolved and changed in the first century, but the verse in Jeremiah may have contributed to the use of the plural form of *nazoraïos* to identify Jewish adherents to Jesus’ movement. At the end of Acts, Paul is accused of being an instigator, “He is

a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes” (*nazoraion*: Acts 24:5b).

There are other examples in which key terms evolved and lost their earlier meaning, as the Church moved beyond its source culture and Hebrew language environment into the Greek-speaking Hellenistic world. Eventually, the term Christian (Acts 26:28; 1 Pet 4:16) replaced Nazarene to designate the followers of Jesus. However, among Jews, including those who believed in Jesus, the term *nozri* continued to designate Jesus and his followers. It likely came to mean *one who keeps* the commandments. Eusebius (AD 305) attests to a shift in terminology, “Previously we who are now called Christians were also called Nazrenes” (Onom. 138:24). Epiphanius (AD 375) condemns the *Nazoraïoi* as heretics (Pan. 29). Their error is defined by Jerome, whose language indicates that it describes Jewish Christians who continued to observe the Torah, “since they want to be both Jews and Christians, they are neither Jews nor Christians” (Epistle 112.13 to Augustine).



Reconstruction of a Byzantine Hebrew inscription, found in excavations at Caesarea in 1962, with a list of priestly courses in which a family from Nazareth is mentioned. According to Mishmaroth 18 a priestly family settled in Nazareth, and likewise Midrash Qohelet 2:8 attests to the priestly character of Nazareth (shaded sections indicate the fragments that were found).