

# NAZARITE OR NAZARENE?

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Most pictures of Jesus have Him with a short cropped beard and very long (feminine looking) hair. From Leviticus 19:27, though, we realize that Yeshua (the Hebrew name for Jesus), as well as all Jewish men, would never have trimmed his beard nor shaved. The Lord had a full, untrimmed beard, like Moses, King David, and all the Apostles, including Paul.<sup>1</sup> Most pictures of Jesus give Him long hair for two reasons:

1. Long hair was the prevalent style in Medieval Europe when the first European ‘pictures’ of Jesus came out.
2. Also, many people think that Jesus was a Nazarite (Num. 6:1ff.), and so, He couldn’t cut His hair because it’s forbidden for a Nazarite to do so (Num. 6:5, 18-19). Therefore, He had to have long hair.

The misunderstanding of Jesus being a Nazarite Vow taker comes from the Apostle Matthew, not that it’s Matthew’s fault. It’s the fault of those who don’t understand what Matthew is saying. He writes of the Prophets calling the Messiah a ‘Nazarene’ (Mt. 2:23), which sounds like the word Nazarite, but any reference to Yeshua having taken the Nazarite Vow, or being born into it (as Samson, Samuel and John the Baptist were) is nowhere to be found in the New or the Old Testaments. The assumption that ‘Nazarene’ means Jesus was a Nazarite is false because the English word *Nazarene* is a direct reference to the city of Nazareth where Yeshua grew up, which Matthew had also just written of. That’s one of two reasons why Matthew refers to the Prophets calling the Messiah a Nazarene—Yeshua came from the city of Nazareth:

“And he (Joseph) came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Prophets, ‘He shall be called a Nazarene.’” (Matthew 2:23; cf. Mt. 4:13; 21:11; 26:71; Mk. 1:9, 24; 10:27; etc.)

In English the city (Nazareth) and the Vow (Nazarite) look and sound very similar, but in Hebrew they are two totally different words and pronunciations:

1. The Hebrew name of the town is נִצְרַת (natz’raht),
2. while the Nazarite Vow taker is called a נָזִיר (nah’zir).

They come from two different root verbs. Also, there is more to the name of the town than meets the eye. Matthew calls Yeshua a ‘Nazarene’ to reveal both the city He grew up in, and also, who Yeshua was—the long awaited Messiah of Israel known as the Branch; a Messianic title.

In his Hebrew New Testament, Franz Delitzsch has Yeshua growing up in נִצְרַת (Nitz’zar’ret), while the Bible Society of Israel has נִצְרַת (Natz’raht) in their modern Hebrew New Testament. The only difference is that Delitzsch (19th century) is spelling the Hebrew word with a closer affinity in pronunciation to the Greek and hence English, ‘Nazareth’ than the actual Hebrew name of the city (Natz’raht).<sup>2</sup> The only difference is in their vowels. Both words, though, have the same four Hebrew consonants and come from the Hebrew noun נִצָּר (netz’zair), and so, ‘Nazareth’ means something that springs up, i.e. a sprout, sprig,

<sup>1</sup> See [The Biblical Beard](#).

<sup>2</sup> Franz Delitzsch, הברית החדשה The Hebrew-English New Covenant (Powder Springs, GA, USA: Hope of Israel Publications), Mt. 2:23.

תורה נביאים כתובים והברית החדשה עברית ואנגלית) Hebrew-English Bible (Book of the Covenants) Torah, Prophets, Writings and The New Covenant: Hebrew and English) The Holy Scriptures: Hebrew and English (Jerusalem: I.A.D.B.W., and the Bible Society of Israel, 2006), Mt. 2:23.

vine, ‘shoot’ or a branch.<sup>3</sup>

Both Hebrew New Testaments have נֹצְרִי (*Notz’ri*)<sup>4</sup> as the translation of Nazarene in Mt. 2:23, which means someone from Nazareth.<sup>5</sup> The meaning of Nazareth and Nazarene is the same (sprig, branch, etc.). Interestingly enough, Israelis use Nazarene (*Notz’ri*) in speaking of a ‘Christian,’ which reveals that ‘Nazarene’ has nothing to do with the Nazarite Vow. In the New Testament the word Nazarene is not only used of Yeshua (the Nazarene; Mt. 2:23), but also for His followers (Nazarenes; Acts 24:5); not because they were all Nazarite Vow takers, but because they followed the Man from Nazareth.<sup>6</sup> It was also a common designation in the Gentile Christian world.<sup>7</sup> Obviously, they weren’t all Nazarite Vow takers, but followers of the One from Nazareth.

The Greek word for Nazareth in Mt. 2:23 is Ναζαρεθ (*Nah’zah’reth*, i.e. Nazareth; cf. Mt. 21:11),<sup>8</sup> which is where the English name for the town of ‘Nazareth’ comes from. The English ‘Nazareth’ is only a transliteration of the Greek word.

The Hebrew noun נֹצֵר *netz’zair* is one of two titles ‘of sprouting’ that Isaiah the Prophet gives to the Messiah. In a famous Messianic prophecy Isaiah speaks of the One from David, the Messiah, being a Branch and a Shoot:

Isaiah 11:1: ‘Then a **Shoot** הֹטֵר (*ho’tear*; another Hebrew word which speaks of ‘sprouting’) will spring from the stem of Jesse, and a **Branch** נֹצֵר (*netz’zair*) from his roots will bear fruit.’ (a fruit tree; cf. Gal. 5:22-23, the Fruit of the Spirit)

It’s the second Hebrew word in Isaiah 11:1, נֹצֵר (*netz’zair*) that Matthew is specifically alluding to when he writes that *the Prophets* called the Messiah a ‘Nazarene’ (a *Netz’zair* or literally a *Notz’ri*, a person from Nazareth). *Notz’ri* means a shoot or a branch; someone coming from Nazareth.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> נֹצֵר Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, and J. J. Stamm, authors; M. Richardson, translator, *The Hebrew-Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, vol. 2 (Boston, MA USA: Brill Academic Publishers, p. 718 (Accordance Software, 2002). “blossom: sprout, offshoot...Is. 11:1; 60:21...plantation (planting) of” of God.

<sup>4</sup> Delitzsch, הברית החדשה *The Hebrew-English New Covenant*, Mt. 2:23.  
ספר הברית (Book of the Covenants) *Hebrew-English Bible* (תורה ונביאים כתובים והברית החדשה עברית ואנגלית) *The Holy Scriptures: Hebrew and English*, Mt. 2:23.

<sup>5</sup> The only difference in the consonantal spelling of Nazareth is the last letter ת (tav) changes to י (yod). Glinert, Lewis, *Modern Hebrew: An Essential Grammar* (New York: Routledge; 2005), pp. 7-8. The ת (tav) on the end of נֹצֵרֶת is the feminine ending for a city. “Countries and towns (cities) are feminine singular...The vast majority of feminine nouns end in either” *kamatz* ה “or ת,” like this: פִּיצָה (*pizza*), or מַרְפֵּסֶת (*balcony*). ‘Nazareth’ stems from נֹצֵר *netz’zair* (branch) with the feminine ending of the ת *tav* making it נֹצֵרֶת (Nazareth) with the vowels changing to accommodate the ת (tav). The *tav* drops off *Natz’raht* and a *yod* is added to make *Notz’ri*; a person from Nazareth.

<sup>6</sup> The sect of the Nazarenes is mentioned or alluded to three times in the New Testament (Acts 23:5, 14; 28:22), every time with the inference from the religious authorities that it was heretical. See [The Nazarene Sect](#).

<sup>7</sup> Ναζωραῖος Walter Bauer, augmented by William F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich and Frederick Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (third edition, 2001), pp. 664-665 (Accordance Bible Software). “Acc. to Acts 24:5 the Christians were [p. 665] so called; s. Kl. Texte 32 p. 3, ln. 32 and 83 p. 6, lines 8, 17, 27; p. 7, note on ln. 1ff; p. 8, ln. 5; p. 9, ln.17; 23; p. 10, ln. 5; 15; p. 11, ln. 28 and note on ln. 9ff, all passages in which Jewish Christians are called Nazaraei, Nazareni, Ναζωραῖοι.—Laud. Therap. 27 the monks are called ναζιραῖοι (with the v. l. Ναζαραῖοι).”

<sup>8</sup> Ναζαρά Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, p. 664. “Ναζαρά, ἡ (Mt 4:13; Lk 4:16), Ναζαρέτ, Ναζαρέθ...Nazareth...Ναζαρέτ...and Ναζαρέθ seem to have the best attestation—Home of Jesus’ parents; the place is not mentioned in the OT, Talmud, Midrash, or Josephus, but plays a significant role in Christian tradition: Mt. 2:23; 4:13; 21:11; Mk. 1:9; Lk. 1:26; 2:4, 39, 51; 4:16.”

<sup>9</sup> Ναζωραῖος Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, p. 664.

The reason why Matthew speaks of Yeshua being called a Nazarene (the Branch) is because God made a dead branch come back to life in the days of Moses and Aaron, and it would become a symbol of the Messiah's resurrection. The branch or staff of Moses was meant to put an end to the rebellion of Israel in the Wilderness, specifically concerning who had made Aaron the High Priest. The rebel Korah said it was because Aaron was Moses' brother that Aaron was High Priest (Num. 16). God, though, set up a sign (miracle) to reveal to all Israel whom He had chosen for High Priest; for God had chosen Israel's High Priest, not Moses (cf. Heb. 5:4).

God had each Tribe (tribal leader) bring its symbol of tribal authority to Moses; its staff, writing the name of their Tribe on it. Moses placed them all before the Ark of the Covenant. The staff was just a *branch* from a tree. The branch which sprouted the next day would reveal which Tribe was God's choice from which the High Priest would come (Num. 17:1-11). Aaron's name was upon the staff of Moses for the Tribe of Levi.

Aaron's staff or **dead branch** (which is also translated into English as a rod)<sup>10</sup> *came (back) to life*; it *sprouted*, put forth buds and had ripe almonds on it (Num. 17:8). God had revealed to Israel whom He had chosen to be Israel's first High Priest, and the term branch would become the conceptual basis for one of the many *names* of the Messiah that are seen in the Prophets.<sup>11</sup> That's why the name of the Branch came into being for the Messiah. This miracle, of a once live, now dead branch coming back to life, is why the Spirit of God took up the concept and spoke of it through the Prophets. This Branch would be God's Chosen (Messiah). It was when Yeshua, the once living man, now dead through the crucifixion, the dead Nazarene 'Branch,' came back to life, glorified, that all Israel could know for certain that God had

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"Mt says expressly in 2:23 that Jesus was so called because he grew up in Nazareth. In addition, the other NT writers who call Jesus Ναζωραῖος know Nazareth as his home." There is no allusion to the Nazarite Vow.

<sup>10</sup> This dead branch was originally the staff of Moses by which God performed all the miraculous signs and wonders (plagues) against Egypt by:

1. Exodus 4:2-5: 'what is in your hand? A staff.' It becomes a snake and back to staff, 'so they will believe' Moses was sent by Yahveh.
2. Ex. 4:17, 20-21, 30-31: Moses is told to take the staff in his hand and God will perform all His miracles before Pharaoh, with the staff that He's placed in the hand of Moses, to do signs with, to make Israel believe that God sent Moses.
3. Ex. 7:9-12: The Staff of Yahveh becomes a snake before Pharaoh, and gobbles up all the staff-snakes of the Egyptian magicians.
4. Ex. 7:15-20: The Staff is raised to strike the Nile River which is turned into blood.
5. Ex. 8:5: The Staff is raised to bring the plague of frogs upon all Egypt.
6. Ex. 8:16-17: The Staff is raised for dust to become gnats.
7. Ex. 9:23: The Staff is raised for lightning, thunder and hail to come upon Egypt.
8. Ex. 10:13: The Staff is raised for locusts to come upon Egypt.
9. Ex. 10:21-23: An allusion is made to the raising of the Staff ('stretch out your hand to the Heavens'), for thick darkness to be over the land of Egypt for three days.
10. Ex. 17:5-6: The Staff is raised to strike the Rock for water.
11. Ex. 17:9: The Staff is raised for victory over Amalek.
12. Num. 17:1-11: The Staff or Rod of Aaron comes alive for all Israel to know that Yahveh made Aaron to be His High Priest.
13. Num. 20:7-9: The Staff should have been raised and his voice invoked, to bring water out of the rock this (second) time, but Moses, in his anger, disobeys Yahveh and strikes the rock.

<sup>11</sup> There are many names or titles for the Messiah, the Branch being one of them. For those names see [The Names of the Messiah of Israel](#).

made Yeshua both Lord and Messiah (and also the High Priest of Israel, as the term Messiah incorporates that; Acts 2:36; cf. Zech. 6:12).

There is another Hebrew word that carries the same concept; of springing up, like *ho'tear* and *netz'zair* found in Isaiah 11:1. It's *Tzeh'mach*, a word for branch which is used a number of times in the Prophets to denote the Messiah of Israel:

Isaiah 4:2: 'In that day the **Branch** נֶזְעַר<sup>12</sup> (*Tzeh'mach*) of Yahveh will be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the Earth will be the pride and the adornment of the survivors of Israel.'

Jeremiah 23:5: 'Behold, the days are coming,' declares Yahveh, 'When I will raise up for David a righteous **Branch** נֶזְעַר<sup>13</sup> (*Tzeh'mach*) and He will reign as King and act wisely and do justice and righteousness in the Land' (of Israel).

Jeremiah 33:15: 'In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous **Branch** נֶזְעַר<sup>14</sup> (*Tzeh'mach*) of David to spring forth (*tzeh'mach*), and He shall execute justice and righteousness in the Land.'

Zechariah 3:8: 'Now listen, High Priest Joshua, 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*' נֶזְעַר<sup>15</sup> (*Tzeh'mach*).

Zech. 6:12: "Then say to him, 'Thus says Yahveh of Hosts, "Behold, a man whose *Name is Branch*' נֶזְעַר<sup>16</sup> (*Tzeh'mach*), for He will *branch out* (*tzeh'mach*) from where He is and He will build the Temple of Yahveh.'""

On the other hand, the word for the Nazarite Vow taker, who would let his hair grow during the taking of the vow, is נָזִיר (*nazir*). In English this is the Nazarite, "someone devoted to God...(and) bound by an oath to allow the hair to grow freely and to abstain from wine, Num. 6:2, 8, 13, 18-21."<sup>17</sup>

It was out of the turbulence of rebellion that God established Aaron to be His anointed High Priest. When Matthew (2:23) calls Yeshua a 'Nazarene,' one who came from Nazareth,<sup>18</sup> he wasn't referring to the Nazarite Vow, but because of the place where He grew up, Yeshua would not only be a Nazarene, but also the Nazarene, the Branch of God, the long-awaited Messiah. John 19:19 reads:

"Pilate also wrote an inscription and put it on the cross. It was written, 'Jesus the Nazarene (*Notz'ri*), the King of the Jews.'"<sup>19</sup>

It can also be translated, 'Jesus the *Branch*, the Messiah-King of the Jews' (cf. Luke 1:30-33).

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<sup>12</sup> נֶזְעַר Koehler, *The Hebrew-Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, vol. 3, p. 1033. "1. to sprout—plants, Gn 25 416.23; vine (נֶזְעַר its sprout) Ezk 179f; a forest of trees; sprouts, Zech 6:12; b. metaphorical; men, Is. 44:4; Jb. 8:19...meaning salvation Zech. 6:12... 2. to grow: a. trees, Ex. 10:5."

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> נָזִיר Koehler, *The Hebrew-Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, vol. 2, p. 683.

<sup>18</sup> Mt. 21:11; 26:71; Mk. 1:9; 10:47; 16:6; Lk. 2:51; 4:16, 34; 18:37; 24:19; Jn. 1:45; 18:5-8; 19:19; Acts 2:22; 3:6; 4:10, etc.

<sup>19</sup> Some other translations have 'Jesus of Nazareth,' which means the same thing.

# Conclusion

It's truly amazing how God dovetails the choice of Israel's first High Priest, using the miraculous sign of a dead branch coming back to life, with His Son being resurrected from the dead and having grown up in the city whose name means branch. The rebellion in the Wilderness set the stage for God to bring a dead branch back to life, and the Spirit of God moved through the Prophets to use words relating to a branch or a sprout, etc., to speak of the Messiah. That's why Matthew says that the Prophets called Yeshua a Nazarene. Matthew was alerting his Jewish audience to Yeshua being the Branch, one of the titles of Messiah.

Theologian D. A. Carson relates some Christian interpretations of why Matthew speaks of Yeshua being a Nazarene and says that,

“The interpretation of this verse has such a long history...that it is not possible to list here all the major options. We may exclude those that see some word-play connection with an OT Hebrew word but have no obvious connection with Nazareth. This eliminates the popular interpretation that makes Jesus a Nazirite or second Samson...Defenders include Calvin...Also to be eliminated are interpretations that try to find in Matthew's term a reference to some kind of pre-Christian sect. But the evidence for this is feeble...and the connection with Nazareth merely verbal...Matthew certainly used *Nazoraïos* as an adjectival form of *apo Nazaret* (“from Nazareth” or “Nazarene”)...Nazareth was a despised place (John 7:42, 52), even to other Galileans (cf. John 1:46). Here Jesus grew up, not as “Jesus the Bethlehemite,” with its Davidic overtones, but as “Jesus the Nazarene,” with all the opprobrium of the sneer. When Christians were referred to in Acts as the “Nazarene sect” (24:5), the expression was meant to hurt. First-century Christian readers of Matthew, who had tasted their share of scorn, would have quickly caught Matthew's point. He is not saying that a particular OT prophet foretold that the Messiah would live in Nazareth; he is saying that the OT prophets foretold that the Messiah would be despised (cf. Pss 22:6-8, 13; 69:8, 20-21; Isa 11:1; 49:7; 53:2-3, 8; Dan 9:26). The theme is repeatedly picked up by Matthew (e.g., 8:20; 11:16-19; 15:7-8). In other words Matthew gives us the substance of several OT passages, not a direct quotation.”<sup>20</sup>

Carson rightly believes that the epitaph was derogatory, but that wasn't Matthew's primary use for the Hebrew word of Nazareth. Even he haltingly admits:

“It is possible that at the same time there is a discreet allusion to the *neser* (“branch”) of Isaiah 11:1, which received a messianic interpretation in the Targums rabbinic literature, and DSS...for here too it is affirmed that David's son would emerge from humble obscurity and low state. Jesus is King Messiah, Son of God, Son of David; *but he was a branch from a royal line hacked down to a stump* and reared in surroundings guaranteed to win him scorn. Jesus the Messiah, Matthew is telling us, did not introduce his kingdom with outward show or present himself with the pomp of an earthly monarch. In accord with prophecy he came as the despised Servant of the Lord.”<sup>21</sup> (cf. Is. 52:13-15f.)

Looking at Matthew 2:23 from the Hebrew language makes it clear that Matthew was saying to his readers that Yeshua was the long-awaited Messiah—the Branch. It's not as clear from the Greek translation nor the English translation, but they do confirm the Hebrew understanding. Most Christian theologians

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<sup>20</sup> D. A. Carson, Author; Frank E. Gaebelin, general Editor; J. D. Douglas, associate ed., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 8, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI, USA: Zondervan, 1984), (Accordance Bible Software), paragraph 44406.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, para. 44408.

and scholars today see Matthew as having been originally written in the Hebrew language.<sup>22</sup>

James, the half-brother of Yeshua and Prince (watered down to ‘President’ in English) of the Council of all the Jewish Christians, said that God had prophesied that He would raise up *or cause to sprout* the fallen down or ‘dead’ Tabernacle (Kingdom) of David. In other words, the resurrection of the Messiah would cause the Kingdom of David to be revived and flourish, and the Gentiles would be invited into it:

“And after they had become silent, James answered, saying, ‘Men and brethren! Listen to me! Simon (Peter) has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles (Acts 10) to take out of them a people for His name. And with this the words of the Prophets agree, just as it is written: ‘After this I will return and will *rebuild the Tabernacle (Kingdom) of David*, which has fallen down. *I will rebuild its ruins* and I will set it up so that the rest of mankind may seek Yahveh, *even all the Gentiles* who are called by My name,’ says Yahveh, who does all these things!’” (Acts 15:13–17; cf. Amos 9:11-12)

In Yeshua, the fallen and ancient Kingdom of David is not only revived, but will exist forever, Yeshua being the King of the Israel:

“Then the angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. Behold! You will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name Yeshua. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High God, and the Lord God will give Him *the Throne (Kingdom) of His father David*, and He will reign over the House of Jacob forever, and of His Kingdom there will be no end.’” (Luke 1:30-33)

With the correct understanding of the Hebrew and Greek words it’s clear that Matthew never intended to present Jesus as a Nazarite (Vow taker), but as someone coming from Nazareth because the term Nazarene has the double allusion of both coming from the (despised) city of Nazareth and being a ‘branch,’ which is a powerful Messianic title used by a number of Prophets to speak of the Messiah of Israel.

As for the pictures of Jesus with long hair, not being a Nazarite He would have had fairly trimmed hair,<sup>23</sup> but hidden, as Edersheim writes, under the ‘turban...wound’ around His head and ‘hanging gracefully behind’<sup>24</sup> His neck and shoulders. The turban would have been worn by all the Jewish men of His time and would have protected their heads and the back of their neck from the scorching heat of the sun. Artists, giving Jesus long hair and a short beard, actually come against God’s Word. The Apostle Paul knew that godly men weren’t to have long hair and said to the Corinthians:

‘Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him?’ (1st Corinthians 11:14)

Yeshua didn’t have long hair. Many Christians today have long hair ‘in imitation’ of Jesus, but they’re deceived, and as James writes, they’re enticed by their own lusts (Jam. 1:12-15). Among the Jews, long hair was a symbol of rebellion, unless one were under the Nazarite Vow, which lasted only 30, 60 and 100 days in the time of Yeshua. Samson, Samuel and John the Baptist were exceptions to that, being Nazarites for life from inception, and so they would have had long hair, but everyone knew their long hair was due to the total dedication to God through the Nazarite Vow, not rebellion to God.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> See [The Lifting of the Veil—Acts 15:20-21](#) p. 18, note 73.

<sup>23</sup> See Ezekiel 44:20 for God’s thoughts on the length of His priests hair.

<sup>24</sup> Alfred Edersheim, *Sketches of Jewish Social Life* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), p. 198.

<sup>25</sup> Revised on Thursday, April 2, 2020.