

Matthew 2:19-23

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After King Herod dies, an angel informs Joseph by dream that it is safe to return to Israel. Joseph obeys, but is careful to avoid the region of Judea, because Herod's son is in charge. In another dream God warns Joseph to go north to the region of Galilee. Joseph obeys and settles his family in the Galilean town of Nazareth. Matthew finishes this chapter by telling his readers that Jesus's upbringing in Nazareth is the (fifth) direct fulfillment of a Messianic prophecy.

The parallel account of this event is found in Luke 2:39.

King Herod died, likely in 4 B.C. An angel of the LORD once again appeared in a dream to tell Joseph in Egypt what to do. It was time to return his family to the land of Israel. The angel's reason is that *those who sought the Child's life are dead*. As before, Joseph obeyed immediately. He got up, took the Child and His mother, and came into the land of Israel.

If the Magi visited Jesus between his first and second birthday, then Herod would have died shortly after issuing the order to massacre the male infants and toddlers of Bethlehem. This does not mean that the angel necessarily appeared to Joseph the moment Herod died. Joseph's angelic dream notifying him that it was safe to return from Egypt may have been months or even years after Herod's death.

But Joseph cautiously avoided living in Judea, near Jerusalem, because Joseph heard that Herod's son Archelaus was now reigning over Judea. He was afraid to go there as a result. His instinct was confirmed by God in another dream. God warned Joseph, causing him to settle in the Northern most part of Israel in the regions of Galilee. He returned to where he lived when he first met Mary, in a city called Nazareth.

Nazareth was located in the hill country, about halfway between the Sea of Galilee and the "Great Sea" (the Mediterranean), about 20 miles each way. It was tucked safely away from the notice of the powerful. It even had a reputation for being backward. When told by his friend Philip that they had found the Messiah, Nathanael famously asked, "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46) But although Nazareth was removed from the corridors of power, it was situated near important highways and Roman roads.

Nazareth was not far from the city of Sepphoris, which was rebuilt during Jesus's upbringing in Galilee, by Antipas, Herod the Great's son. Sepphoris was a Roman city, located at the intersection of two major trade routes, and it was the seat of the Roman government in Galilee. In many respects it was a little Rome, complete with an amphitheater and colonnade. Because Joseph was a craftsman/carpenter ("Tekton" in Greek: literally stone cutter or artisan) it is likely that Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, spent much of His life building this pagan city four miles from His home. "Tekton" could mean Jesus was a carpenter; it can apply to any sort of craftsman. Given the nature of the local building materials and what is known of Sepphoris, it is likely their work entailed a substantial amount of stonework, possibly including building mosaics.

Matthew cites the prophecy: *He shall be called a Nazarene*. But upon inspection there is no phrase in the entire Old Testament that appears to say these words, in English translations.

Why then does Matthew say Jesus living in Nazareth was to *fulfill what was spoken through prophets*?

We don't really know, but since Matthew is writing to a Jewish audience to prove Jesus is the Messiah, it would not make any sense for him to include a *fulfillment* of a prophecy that was not generally accepted by his intended audience, and readily recognizable to a Jewish reader. So we are left to speculate as to the linguistic match for Matthew's assertion. It may be based on a word-connection between "Nazareth" (Nazeret in Hebrew) and the Hebrew word for "Shoot" or "Branch" – "Netzer." Perhaps Nazareth is akin to "Netzer-ville" or some other connection that would be obvious to a Jewish eye. The prophet Isaiah prophesies that a "netzer" will shoot up from the "stem of Jesse" (King David's father) or from King David's line.

"Then a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse,
And a branch (Netzer) from his roots will bear fruit.
The Spirit of the Lord will rest on Him,
The spirit of wisdom and understanding,
The spirit of counsel and strength,
The spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord."
(Isaiah 11:1-2)

By linking Nazareth and Netzer phonetically and prophetically, in a very Jewish sense, it seems plausible that Matthew here cleverly claims that Jesus being raised in Nazareth is a fulfillment of Isaiah's "Netzer" prophecy. A prophecy which further strengthens Jesus's kinship with King David. As the Messiah, Jesus is the Netzer that rises from the stem of Jesse, full of the Spirit. And He hails from Nazareth.

Biblical Text

2:19-23 But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, and said, "Get up, take the Child and His mother, and go into the land of Israel; for those who sought the Child's life are dead." So Joseph got up, took the Child and His mother, and came into the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Then after being warned by God in a dream, he left for the regions of Galilee, and came and lived in a city called Nazareth. This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophets: "He shall be called a Nazarene."