

What is a Nazarene? And where is Nazareth?



Tabula Peutingeriana – Roman world map 4th century AD

Matthew's Gospel is the first book of the New Testament and possibly the most quoted book of the Bible. It contains the Lord's prayer, the Sermon on the Mount and the great commission. Matthew wrote for a Jewish audience, an educated audience who knew the scriptures and the genealogies of their ancestors. They would have understood the expressions and idioms used by 1st century Jews and would have understood and appreciated the narrative that Matthew presented much better than readers do today.

So, when Matthew wrote of Jesus being from Nazareth and being called a Nazarene, he did not feel it necessary to define these terms. Also, when he spoke of the prophets calling Jesus a Nazarene, he wrote with the expectation that his audience would understand what prophecies and scriptures he was referring to. Matthew wrote:

"Jesus 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.

John's gospel on the other hand does attempt to explain some terms. Even though John was also writing to Jewish audience, he or possibly a later scribe has inserted additional text to support the story. These additions include the definition of the word "Rabbi" (which means teacher)" John 1:38, and a verse (John 5:4), to explain why the invalid waited by the pool. It is thought the John 5:4 may have been a footnote than was later included into the text. These explanations help modern readers to better understand John's gospel, but Jews in the first century would not have needed these additions.

Even with further study, modern readers do start at a disadvantage compared to 1st century Jews when reading the Biblical stories, and even struggle to understand much of what would have been common knowledge at the time. This is certainly the case of our understanding of the words *Nazarene* and *Nazareth*. For centuries, it has been assumed there was a town or city in northern Israel called Nazareth at the time of Jesus, and it was assumed that a Nazarene was from a town called Nazareth. These assumptions appeared to fit the story of Jesus until it was discovered no city named Nazareth existed in the first century AD.

It has become apparent that the assumed definition of a Nazarene was lacking, since the archaeological evidence shows little more than a few homes in Jesus' time where Nazareth now stands and no evidence of Nazareth beings any more than a small community until the 4th century AD. There is also a lack of historical or literacy evidence to support a city of Nazareth. The Old Testament scriptures make no mention of a town or village called Nazareth. The Book of Joshua records twelve towns and six villages in the land belonging to the tribe of Zebulun but makes no mention of Nazareth. Josephus, the Jewish historian, lists 45 cities and villages of the region of Galilee but also makes no mention of Nazareth.

The Gospels speak of Jesus' hometown as a city. Luke records how Jesus read from the book of Isaiah in the synagogue in his hometown and records the anger of the crowd, who were so outraged by Jesus' actions, in their anger they attempted to throw Jesus from the top of the hill of the city (Luke 4:28-29). Yet, there is no archaeological evidence of a synagogue or a nearby hill in modern Nazareth.

The city of Nazareth that we know today does not match Matthew or Luke's description of a "city of Nazarenes" (Matthew 10:14, Luke 2:4). Nazareth is located on a relatively flat area, not on a hill.

The lack of any historical or archaeological evidence for a city called Nazareth existing in Jesus' time is not a new revelation. It has been known of for some time that there was never a city on the site. In response, newer Bible translators have attempted to correct this contradiction by translating the Greek word for city, *poleōs*, as a town. However, changing the text of Bible is not the solution.

The problem is that we do not understand fully what the words Nazarene and Nazareth refer to. This lack of evidence may seem trivial, but it is a misunderstanding that presents a much greater problem for Christians and Muslims being wrongly labelled as *Nazarenes* or *Nasara*.

The term Nazarene was a widely used term amongst first-century Jews. The servant girl used the term “*nazarene*” when she recognised Peter (Mark 14:67), as did Tertullus, the Jewish Lawler, at Paul’s trial when speaking to Felix the Roman magistrate (Acts 24:5). The Jews used the term when speaking of Jesus and his disciples, and Pilate used the term as a charge against Jesus. The sign nailed to the cross read, ‘*Jesus the Nazarene King of the Jews*’ (John 19:19, Mark 15:26, Luke 23:38, Matthew 27:37).

Jesus and his followers were accused of being Nazarenes but neither Paul nor any of Jesus’ disciples called themselves Nazarenes. Jesus’ followers initially identified themselves as ‘Believers’ and then later as Christians. It was the Greeks of Antioch who first used the label “Christians” to identify the followers of Jesus Christ. The Jews, however, did not use the term believers or the term Christians when speaking of Jesus and his followers, instead they used the term Nazarenes. It is not surprising the Jews did not call Jesus’ disciples Christians, since the term “Christian” would be an acknowledgement that Jesus was the “Christ”, the anointed one.

The term also appears to have been in use for centuries before Jesus’ time. Jeremiah used the Hebrew equivalent *Netsarim* (Jeremiah 4:16, 31:6). The word *Netsarim* is translated in a variety of ways, as watchers or watchmen, besiegers, besieging army, guards and bands. However, the meaning of *Nazarene* or *Netsarim* has not changed. The words *netsarim* and *nazarene* come from the Hebrew word ‘*netzer*’, meaning branch, sprout or shoot.

The branch is one of the central themes of the Scriptures. Israel was symbolised as a branch, a growing vine, fig or olive-tree.

*"Thou hast brought a **Vine** out of Egypt: Thou hast cast out the heathen and planted it. Thou preparedst room before it, and didst cause it to take deep root, and it filled the land. The hills were covered with the shadow of it, and the boughs thereof were like goodly cedars. She sent out her boughs unto the sea and her branches unto the river."*
Psalms 80:8-11

The Jews saw themselves as **branches** of this vine or tree and believed themselves to be true descendants of Israel and the inheritors of God's covenants and blessings. They saw their role as keeping and preserving the Law and guarded against false prophets. The Jews traced their ancestry through Abraham and Jacob and David and listed in great detail the various genealogical **branches** of the family tree. The Jews were proud of their ancestry and considered themselves the true descendants of Judah and the rightful inheritors of God's kingdom.

Abraham had many children and there had been many **branches** that claimed to be descendants of Abraham and David but some, such as the Samaritans, were considered to be false branches.

The **branch** also symbolised the coming Messiah who would be both King and Priest. Jeremiah spoke of "*the righteous branch*" (*tsemach*) that would reign wisely as King (Jeremiah 23:5, 33:15). Zachariah spoke of, "*my servant the Branch*" (Zechariah 3:8), and wrote "*Thus speaketh the Lord of hosts, saying, Behold the man whose name is **the Branch** and he shall grow up out of his place, and he shall build the temple of the LORD*" (Zechariah 6:12).

Isaiah said, "***the branch** of the LORD be beautiful and glorious*" (Isaiah 4:2), and that a "***branch** that will grow from the stem of Jesse*", ***the branch** that "shall grow out of his roots"* (Isaiah 11:1).

The prophets spoke of a young green branch, a shoot; using the Hebrew words *netzer* and *tsemach*.¹ They linked this to the coming Messiah and Israel with the continuing theme of God as a gardener. God is the Gardener who planted a garden in Eden (Genesis 2:8). He is the Gardener who cuts off every branch that does not bear fruit and prunes the branches so the tree will be more fruitful (John 15:2).

The Apostle Paul continued the theme of God's people as branches. He spoke of the Jews as the natural branches and others as wild branches.

Paul said if the root is holy, so are the branches, but God has not spared the natural branches. Believers, both the natural and the wild branches are grafted onto the tree (Romans 11:16-24). Then, as a gardener burns the cuttings that are pruned each year, God will also cast the unbelievers; both the wild and natural branches onto the eternal fire.

A branch by its very nature will branch and separate. A branch will separate itself from the trunk, as a child separates itself from its parents and grows in its own way. Within any family or organisation or belief system, there are divisions, denominations and sects. During the time of Jesus, the Jews were divided into different sects or schools of thought. The Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes and Zealots tolerated each other but not those who followed more unaccepted practices. Those sects or groups of Israelites who were separated or separated themselves from mainstream religious practices were called Nazarenes or *netsarim*. This definition also included those who were geographically separated and had not returned to Jerusalem.

¹ While some argue the words *Netzer* and *tsemach* refer to separate prophecies, the writers of the Dead Sea Scrolls used the terms interchangeably.

Israel was a nation focussed on rebuilding itself and maintaining its rightful place with God. Solidarity was seen as essential, which is why the term *Nazarene* was linked to the identify of Israel. It is a reflection of the historic, social and geographical divisions of its people. The term was only used by Jews to describe other Jews and other descendants of Israel. This is why the Jews called Paul and early believers, Nazarenes. The Jews identified Jesus and his followers as a sect of Judaism. They recognised that they were Israelites but believed they had separated themselves by their false beliefs and religious practices. Any Jew considered to be a heretic were called many names, including the name “*Nazarene*”.

The Jewish followers of Jesus were not the first people to be called Nazarenes or heretics. Jeremiah called the Samaritans, or those on the Hills of Ephraim, ***Netzarim*** (Jeremiah 31:6). And the terms Samaritan and Nazarene continued to be used interchangeably with Jesus also being called “*a Samaritan*” (John 8:48).

The Samaritans were separated from Judah; geographically, historically, culturally and by their religious practices. Jeremiah prophesied the *netsarim* would come and cry against the city of Jerusalem (4:16). This prophecy is not referring to a besieging army of invaders but to the Samaritans (Nazarenes). Who after their offer of help rebuild the temple was rejected, protested the rebuilding of Jerusalem to the Babylonian king and had the rebuilding works stopped.

Nazarite

The Greek words *Nazarite* and *Nazarene* are obviously very similar, as is the word Hebrew “*nazir*” meaning *separated* and the word “*netzer*” meaning *branch*.

A *nazarite* is defined as, “*separated themselves unto God*” (Numbers 6:6). Nazarites separated themselves by vowing to abstain from wine, dead animals and the cutting of their hair for a period of time. Samuel and Samson are two well-known Nazarites (1 Samuel 1:1, Judges 13:5). While there are arguments about whether Jesus could be called a Nazarite, the point that needs to be recognised is that both words do come from the word *netzer* or *branch*. The term Nazarite or Nazarene was only used for fellow Israelites (branches of Israel).

A ***Nazarene*** can be defined as someone (*a branch*) ***that is separated***. Usually used as a negative connotation of being separated from God or God’s people.

A ***Nazarite*** has a more specific meaning of (*a branch*); ***separated unto God***.

This word is used in the positive sense of being with God but separated from sin.

The word Nazarene was often used as an insult, but its meaning depends on the context. When Philip introduced Jesus to Nathanael he declared, “*We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph*” (John 1: 44-45).

Peter healed the beggar in the name of “*Jesus Christ of Nazareth*” (Acts 3:6) and the angel referred to the risen Jesus as “*Jesus the Nazarene*” (Mark 16:6).

The Jews and the Jewish lawyer Tertullus used the term Nazarene as an accusation. Accusing Paul and Jesus’ followers as being a sect and stirring up trouble. (Acts 24:4-5).

The prophets had described the coming Messiah and said he would be called the Branch (Isaiah 11:1). Jesus is symbolised as the staff of Aaron, the dead branch that God brought back to life (Numbers 17). Jesus was the rejected branch, the branch that was separated or cut off from the vine. Jesus is also the shoot that has been grafted back unto the stump of Jesse, and onto the tree of life.

In Jeremiah (31:6), the word Netzarim, (Nazarene) is associated with the hope of the separated ones on the hills of Ephraim will one day be **united** with the remnant of Israel.

In Matthew 21:11, the crowds identified Jesus as a Nazarene because he was not from Jerusalem or Judea, but from Nazareth Galilee.

The man in the synagogue with the unclean spirit knew Jesus was the Holy one of God and addressed him as a Nazarene (Mark 1:24, Luke 4:34).

The analogy of the branch is a central theme of the whole Bible. The Jews saw themselves as God's people, the true branches, a light surrounded by darkness and evil. Their world view was of Jews and Gentiles, but they also recognised the existence of those they called Nazarenes, Israelites who had not returned to Jerusalem and to God and the Law. Israelites who were still separated by false beliefs, by customs and also by geography.

Nazareth is not listed on a map or recorded in a list of cities, for Nazareth was never a single location on a map. Nazareth was seen as a region outside of Judea, a region that contained many cities and towns. To find Nazareth we need to look back in history to see how Israel had been changed over the centuries.

The map below shows Israel with its tribal divisions; from the settlement of the Promised Land till the Assyrian conquest in 733 BC.



The Assyrians conquered and destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel, and forcibly relocated the northern tribes to other regions within the Assyrian empire. The conquest of Israel left a scar that endured with much of northern Israel remaining deserted for centuries afterwards. The Assyrian army continued south, capturing 46 cities of Judah until one city remained, Jerusalem.

The capital of the southern kingdom of Israel survived the Assyrian siege and the kingdom of Judah existed for another century and a half. Then in 587 BC, the Babylonians completed the destruction of the country and Jerusalem and Israel virtually vanished from the map. However, a remnant did survive and a people called Judah were taken into exile to Babylon.

After 70 years of exile, the Jews were finally able to return to Jerusalem after the Persians and Medes conquered the Babylonian empire in 539 BC. Cyrus the Great allowed the Jews to return home and to begin the rebuilding of Jerusalem and its temple.

The Jews hoped that Israel would be restored to its former glory but after five centuries of rebuilding and resettlement of the land, Israel still did not match its former glory.

By the time of the Roman occupation, Israel was a country still divided, existed primarily as three separate regions. Judaea in the south and Galilee in the north, with Samaria in the middle, separating the two regions. (see map below)



The Samaritans were people of mixed backgrounds. Some were descendants of the original inhabitants of the land; others were descendants of people who had emigrated into the region. Many of the Samaritans had adopted or held onto the religious practices of Moses and the prophets, but the Jews did not accept them as true Israelites and did not recognise them as people of the covenant. They disliked the Samaritans to the extent that they would not associate or even speak to them and would even avoid passing through their territory when travelling north to Galilee.

Galilee and its people had suffered greatly during the Assyrians conquest, and Galilee remained unpopulated for centuries. However, by the first century AD, Galilee had a large population of Jews, descendants of those that had resettled the area a century earlier. Even though Galilee was resettled by Jews, it was still called the land of Gentiles. The prophet Isaiah had described, the land of Zebulun and Naphtali as “a place of darkness” (Isaiah 9:1-2).

In Jesus' time, there was animosity between the Judaeans in the south and the Galileans in the north. Galilee was a fertile and prosperous area, and the region was separated from Judea by the Samaritans living between them. The Galileans spoke a distinctive form of Aramaic and were seen to be more open to Hellenistic influences than the more conservative south.

It is from this sense of mistrust and disunity, that we first hear the word Nazarene (a separated branch). Nazareth was not marked on a map or recorded in any list of cities. Nazareth appears to have been used as an expression to describe the regions of Galilee and Samaria. The region that once was part of Israel but still considered to be separated from Judah and Jerusalem.

The terms Galilee and Nazarene appear together. (John 7:40-42, 52, Matthew 2:23, 3:13, 21:11, Mark 1:9, Luke 1:26, 2:4, 39). When Nicodemus defended Jesus, the other Pharisees asked him, "Are you from Galilee too? Search and see that no prophet arises from Galilee." John 7:52.

The Jews called Jesus a Samaritan (John 8:48) and a Nazarene. They considered Jesus to be a false prophet and a false Messiah and asked;

"How can the Christ come from Galilee?" John 7:41

The same question that Nathanael asked,

"Can anything good come out of Nazareth" John 1:46.

While Jesus may have lived and grown up in the same location that we now call Nazareth, if he did, he would not of been living in the center of a small settlement, but the outskirts of a large city, a city that was also known by the name the “City of Nazarenes”. The name of this city that was on a hill and was large enough to support a synagogue, must be *Sepphoris*. During Jesus' time, *Sepphoris* was a wealthy trading city with a large Jewish population. It was the ancient capital of Galilee and Josephus called the city 'the Jewel of Galilee'. *Sepphoris* was previously known by its Hebrew name of *Zippori*, meaning a bird perched on a hill. According to Christian tradition, *Sepphoris* was the city of Mary's mother and father. Today it remains a city set on a hill that is not hidden (Matthew 5:14).

Matthew wrote, *“Jesus came and dwelt in [Sepphoris] a city called Nazareth: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, He shall be called a Nazarene”* Matthew 2:23.

Jesus was born the King of Israel and its high Priest, yet he was not born in Jerusalem or even accepted as a priest. He grew up in Galilee and was considered an outsider, a “Nazarene”. As Matthew reminds us that, from the very start, nothing about Jesus seems to indicate that he was the Messiah. What Matthew reminded his audience of, was not a single prophetic verse

that a summary of all of the messianic prophecies with the word Nazarene, the Branch - Separated.

Matthew was pointing out that the Messiah, the king and high priest of Israel was not protected and nurtured by his people. He was not welcomed and celebrated but lived his life mostly removed and isolated from Jerusalem and its temple and from the people of Judea. As the prophet Isaiah foretold, Jesus would be rejected and despised. Even his family began to believe that he was crazy. He was sentenced to death and led out of the camp of the Israelites as a criminal. Jesus was separated from his people and Matthew sums up Jesus' life and the Messianic prophecies with one sentence. *"he would be called Nazarene"*.

Nazarenes in the Quran

It is unfortunate that Christians have misunderstood the meaning of the terms Nazarene and Nazareth, but what makes this mistake even worse is its influence on the interpretation of the Arabic word *Nasara* found in the Quran.

There is no dispute that *Nasara* means Nazarenes but there is no indication that the Quran is speaking of Christians when it mentions the Nazarenes. The Quran describes *Nasara* as unbelievers and says Jews and the *Nasara* *"are allies of one another"* (5:51), which is not an accurate description of Christians or their relationship with Jews.

Muslims and Christians have been under the misunderstanding for centuries that the word Nazarene or *Nasara* means Christian and they continue to wrongly believe that the Quran speaks against Christian believers. This error is based on the misunderstanding of the use of the word Nazarene in the Bible.

When the Jews called Christians, Nazarenes, they were not identifying them as followers of Christ, but as heretics and members of a false sect. Similarly, the word *Nasara* as used in the Quran, can be best understood as a reference to Jews belonging to various sects. The Quran continually speaks out against the unbelieving Jews and their sects that do not believe that Jesus is the Messiah.

The Jews were critical of Jesus and accused he of being a false prophet and a false Messiah. The Quran, however, praises Jesus and declares Jesus to be the Messenger of God, a true Prophet of God and the true Messiah and confirms the details of Mary's virgin birth.

The Jews accused his Jesus followers of being a Jewish sect that was causing trouble. The Quran does not speak of Jesus' followers as a sect but calls them Muslims and Believers and declares that Jesus is the one to be obeyed.

The Quran does not use the term "Christians" or "Christianity" but acknowledges Christian believers as "Believers", (mu'minin) (Q 85:7, 30:4) as "Muslims" (Q 5:111), "disciples of Jesus" (Q 3:52), "people of the Gospel" (Q 5:47), "people of the message" (Q 16:43, 21:7), 'followers of the Messenger' (Q 3:53, 57:27), "witnesses of the truth" (Q 3:53), "waiters" (Q 52:31) who wait for the return of Christ, and as "Anṣāru" or supporters of God (Q 3:52, 61:14).

The Quran reminds us of the Christians of Najran in southern Arabia who were massacred by the King of Yemen, Dhu Nuwas in the 6th century. The Quran refers to these twenty thousand Christians who were burnt alive and killed with the sword when they did not renounce their faith. The Quran does not refer to them as nasara, but instead calls them "Believers" (Q 85:4-8).

The Quran praises Believers (Q 3:55, 48:29) and praises Jesus and the truth of the Gospel and uses Christians as examples and as models of faith. Believers have been called different names, but while we use term Christian today, it was not a term that Jesus or his disciples had used themselves.

Instead, Jesus' disciples referred to each other as "believers", "brothers", "children of God" (1 John 3:1), "servants" (Luke 17:10), "followers of the way" (Acts 22:4), "the church" (Philippians 3:6), "saints" (Acts 9:41) and as "children of the promise" (Romans 9:8).

When Jesus Christ's followers were first labelled "Christians", it was used as a derogatory term by the Greeks of Antioch in Syria, some years after Jesus' death (Acts 11:26). The reason that Believers have embraced or suffered the use of the term may be because of Peter's words:

"Yet if any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf." 1 Peter 4:16

It would be out of context for the Quran to speak of Jews and Christians together, for they are not united in belief. So instead of assuming Nazarene means Christian, let us read and listen to what the Quran says.

The Quran makes numerous references to the Nasara, or Nazarenes (Q 2:62, 2:111, 2:113, 2:120, 2:135, 2:140, 5:14, 5:18, 5:51, 5:69, 5:82, 9:30, 22:17).

It says that God placed "*compassion and mercy*" in the hearts of those who follow Jesus (Q 57:27) but calls the Nasara a people of enmity and hatred (Q 5:14).

The Quran describes the Nasara as a people who were not believers (Q 9:30), a people who believed that their ancestry had determined their place in heaven (Q 2:111), a people who were descendants of Jacob and the tribes of Israel (Q 2:140), and a people who argue with the Jews about the accuracy of the scriptures (Q 2:113).

The Nasara could be any of the various Jewish sects who shared an Israelite ancestry and supported and allied with the Jews and so also supported and encouraged their unbelief (Q 5:51).

The ancient writer Epiphanes points out a tendency to identify individual sects, not by name but label them with one generic label. The people that do fit the generic label Nasara are the first people to be called Nazarenes; the Samaritans.

The Samaritans are descendants of Israel and believe the first five books of the Bible are inspired. They still have a system of priests and monks and were once part of the covenant of God. Like the Jews, they too are expecting a Messiah that is still to come (John 4:25, Deuteronomy 18:15) and like the Jews, they also continue to reject Jesus as the Messiah.

The New Testament and the Quran remind us that thousands of Samaritans did accept Jesus and became believers and remind us that Jesus did not find the greatest acts of faith and love among the Israelites but found it amongst the Samaritans. John tells us that Jesus found great faith in the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:1-42). Luke spoke of the Good Samaritan who showed great love when he assisted the injured man on the roadside (Luke 10:25-37).

The Quran writes:

"And when the Nasara [Samaritans] listened to what has been sent down to the Messenger [Jesus] you see their eyes overflowing with tears because of the truth they have recognised. They say: "Our Lord! We believe; so write us down among the witnesses" Q 5:83.

Mohammad appears to have used the word *ansara* as a pun. Like the story of the rejected stone that became the head cornerstone (Psalm 118:22, Matthew 21:42, 1 Peter 2:7).

The Quran points out, that *ansara* (Christian believers) are not *Nasara* (a false sect), but are instead *true believers, righteous ones*, the true supporters of God and followers of a straight and true path.

It was the Jews who accused other Jews of being Nazarenes. The term was not used to describe gentiles or used by gentiles or by believers to describe each other. Some Jewish sects, such as the Ebionites, did embrace the term Nazarenes and some of these groups even acknowledged Jesus to be the Messiah and a righteous teacher. However, fourth-century writers such as Epiphanius, Jerome, Theodoret, and the Bishop of Cyrrhus spoke out against groups who called themselves Nazarenes. They declared any Jews, even those who accepted Jesus as a teacher or the Messiah but still held to the Law and its requirements, were not Christians but Jews (Pritz, 1988, p. 88).

For centuries we have assumed a Nazarene was someone from Nazareth, but this simple definition has created stumbling blocks for unbelievers. Causing some to even doubt the accuracy of the scriptures because of a lack of evidence for the existence of a town called Nazareth. In turn, from a simple misunderstanding many find excuses to doubt that Jesus even existed.

To those who attempt to defend the traditional account by arguing that Nazareth was a very small village at the time of Jesus; this does not help our overall understanding of the Gospel story.

"There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. Isaiah 11:1

"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 was esteemed him not." Isaiah 53:3

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