NAZARETH

But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, "Rise, take the child and his mother to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child's life are dead.
Matthew 2:19

Just as Pharaoh had died in Egypt which prompted Moses' return by the Word of God, so too, Herod's death, prefigured by that of Pharaoh, prompts Joseph to return to Israel by the same Word. Joseph, Mary and Jesus had been in Egypt for a time. This is not surprising. Egypt was in proximity and there already was a large Jewish community there.

Herod had reigned from 37 BC until 4 BC. His death not only allowed for the return of Joseph and his family, but for many others who over the years fled his tyranny such as the Qumran community.

Matthew's narrative is tracking history while he directs the readers' gaze. This verse brings about the exit from Egypt recalling the Exodus event while simultaneously sending the child *Jesus* to the Land of Promise thus, alluding to the story of *Joshua* leading Israel to end the Exodus.

Just as significant, this exit from Egypt is the precursor to the eventual destination of Nazareth which Matthew moves us toward with intention.

Patriarchal history had ended in withdrawal to Egypt; evangelical history begins there.
Bruner – Matthew, page 75

Matthew's narrative has been austere, absent of overt detail and pretention. Even here, he does not camp on the king's death or use it as justification of God's justice on the wicked. In his style, Matthew simply moves the narrative along and keeps the reader's focus on those things he deems noteworthy and Christ glorifying. This he will not detract from.

If we must sidebar onto Herod and his death, let us do so briefly and with the same intention Matthew would have: to see within ourselves a King Herod, and a possibility for King Jesus.

The main point of Herod for the doctrine of human nature is this: Herod is not dead; Herod lives on in us, the people of God (and not just the enemies of the people of God). The exaggerated, ambitious, pretentious, self-centeredness, greed for position, grudge against God, guile, and finally human cruelty and insensitivity – the fruit of our war with God – must be contended with even by Christians until the Last Judgment. There are two kings at war in the world and in all of us – Herod and Christ. We know who will win, but meanwhile the battle rages. Herod is here in Scripture partly as a warning to the Christian reader of who he or she, in no little measure, still is.
Bruner – Matthew, page 71

Rise, take the child and his mother to the land of Israel

Again, from Egypt to Israel; an unmistakable Exodus allusion.

for those who sought the child's life are dead.

We saw this earlier in our study, but since it emphasizes the Exodus theme, we can refer to it again.

And the LORD said to Moses in Midian, "Go back to Egypt, <u>for all who sought your life are dead</u>."
Exodus 4:19

Matthew next propels the narrative out of Egypt and back to the land of Israel.

And he rose and took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel.
Matthew 2:21

The Exodus theme continues. At this juncture, Jesus under his parent's protection and guidance, represents a corporate Israel returning to the land.

Once again Matthew uses the repeated phrase *"the child and his mother"* and once again without Joseph saying a word, he remains obedient in that silence.

This suggests that Matthew is preparing the reader for the posture and attitude that will be the essence of the child whom Joseph now has charge of.

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth.
Isaiah 53:7

Luke does not make mention of the flight to Egypt. His narrative proceeds from the naming of Jesus at the temple followed by a return to Nazareth.

Matthew's narrative by contrast is retracing the steps taken by God's beloved son - from the exile in Egypt, back to Israel, where in fear of Herod's son, they go to Nazareth in Galilee.

The reason for this could be that Matthew is proclaiming the child Jesus as the True Israel, the True Son of David, the fulfillment of prophecy and God's promises, and the coming of the King / Priest into the land.

In that proclamation, Matthew sets forth in these first two chapters of his Gospel, the inevitable reception by some and the grievous rejection by others of this King.

The King of the Jews returns to the land of Israel but still finds himself, in a sense, exiled. There is no fanfare to accompany him. No shouting entourage proclaiming his grandeur. No parade by the officials and religious leaders as he enters.

The next verse in Matthew's intentional narrative conveys the absence of any royal procession regarding this King arrival with tragic clarity.

But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee.
Matthew 2:22

Joseph's fear of Archelaus appears to have been well founded. In the not-to-distant future, his subjects would go to Rome and appeal to Caesar to have him successfully deposed.

Here we have the last dream account where Joseph receives counsel from the Lord. Once again, he is obedient with the charge entrusted to him regarding the child and his mother.

And once more Matthew tells us of the Divine protection given by God over the vulnerable child.

We are not told that Joseph was instructed to go to Galilee, but it was surely God's intention they should journey to that destination.

But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light, those who dwell in a land of deep darkness, on them has a light shined.
Isaiah 9:1-2

Matthew's narrative has taken us from Israel to Egypt, back to Israel, then to Galilee where the travel narrative ends for the child in Nazareth. Matthew continues to give geographic locations.

Galilee has theological significance for Matthew. This is the location where Jesus inaugurates his ministry in fulfillment of the Isaiah 9 verse above. Also, Galilee's large population of Gentiles symbolizes the universal significance toward humanity that Matthew sees Jesus prophetically fulfilling. His narrative thus far has primed us for the mission of the Messiah.

And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth, that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled: "He shall be called a Nazarene."
Matthew 2:23

The Gospel writers understand the dilemma of Jesus being a resident of Nazareth.

Phillip found Nataniel and said to him, "We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph."
Nathaniel said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"
John 1:45-46

Nazareth is unknown from the Old Testament or any other source earlier than the New Testament. Perhaps this is God's will. With no former identity codified, the city was not connected to any commonly known history save that of a place with lower status.

Matthew has the difficulty in relating that the Messianic King of the Jews grew up in such a place. He takes this disadvantage and turns it to his favor.

1) Some see in Jesus' residing in Nazareth, a deliberate allusion to Isaiah's despised servant.
2) Some see in the root of the word *Nazareth*, the Hebrews consonants *nsr,* meaning *"to protect"* with the resulting reading meaning *"branch."* Hebrew having no consonants, the word for branch would come off *nsr* which was pronounced as *netser.* This has the same main consonants as *Nazareth.* In the Aramaic of Jesus' day, the word for *Nazareth* and the Hebrews word for *branch* sounded very similar.

> *There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a <u>branch</u> (neser) shall grow <u>out of his roots</u> and shall bear fruit. And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.*
> *Isaiah 11:1-2*

In this view, by being called a *Nazarene,* Matthew is saying that Jesus is the Branch promised to David to be the King of Israel, who would sprout up from an obscure village in Galilee.

The Matthew connection to Isaiah's 7:14 and 11:1-2 messianic passages is plausible. It also has the advantage of Matthew's related quotation from Isaiah 7:14.

> *Therefore the LORD himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and you shall call his name Immanuel.*
> *Isaiah 7:14*

> *Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel.*
> *Matthew 1:23*

The Messianic figure of Isaiah 11:1 is the Emmanuel of Isaiah 7:14.

3) It could be that Matthew is not quoting from the Old Testament at all but some other source that would have been known to the readers of his day but not to us.
4) This could be an allusion to a passage in Judges, where God tells Sampson's mother that her son will be a *Nazarite.* What makes this proposition appealing is that the verse also includes a promise that the woman will conceive and bear a son which is similar to Matthew's birth narrative for Jesus.

for behold, you shall conceive and bear a son. No razor shall come upon his head, for the child shall be a Nazarite to God from the womb, and he shall begin to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines. but he said to me, "Behold, you shall conceive and bear a son. So then drink no wine or strong drink, and eat nothing unclean, for the child shall be a Nazarite to God from the womb to the day of his death."
Judges 13:5, 7

5) Another option is that Matthew is using the phrase *Nazarene* to refer to Jesus as someone despised and rejected.

But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by everyone, despised by the people. All who see me mock me, they hurl insults, shaking their heads.
Psalm 22:6-7

What is interesting however in Matthew's intention, is that he uses the plural word *prophets* when he claims that Jesus would be called a Nazarene.

that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled: "He shall be called a Nazarene."
Matthew 2:23

Is Matthew telling us that what he has in mind here are several prophets and not just one? The use of the word *prophets* in conjunction with the quote *"He shall be called a Nazarene"* where no *quotes* with such wording can be found, could suggest he is stressing the words of several Old Testament prophets without a direct quote that's worded verbatim.

This text is introduced very similarly to the four explicit Old Testament quotations in Matthew's infancy narrative. But no Old Testament text ever declares that anyone will be called a Nazarene. Nor does any known apocryphal or pseudepigraphal text include such a statement. How, then, can Matthew think that prophecy is fulfilled?
Blomberg – Commentary on the New Testament of the Old Testament, page 11

Of these five possible meanings, let's go back to the idea of *Nazarene* being a *branch*.

There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch (neser) shall grow out of his roots and shall bear fruit.

Phonetically, the Hebrew word *Nasarat (Nazareth)* and the word *neser (branch)* have the same middle consonant. The word *neser*, although only occurring in Isaiah 11:1, became an important designation of the Messiah in the rabbinic literature and targums, and was also interpreted messianically by the Qumran community 1QH 6:15, 7:6, 8, 10, 19.

Other prophets also use this *"branch"* language.

Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.
Jeremiah 23:5

In those days at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David, and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.
Jeremiah 33:15

Hear now, O Joshua the high priest, you and your friends who sit before you, for they are men who are a sign: behold, I will bring my servant the Branch.
Zechariah 3:8

These words form a unified concept in looking to the fulfillment of the promises, and the mention of one doubtless brought the others to mind automatically. This may well be the explanation of the plural "prophets" in Matthew's introduction formula. If this theory is correct, then we must believe that Greek readers did not realize the wordplay until they became acquainted with the meaning neser in Hebrew. This, however, is precisely the kind of material that is quickly passed on orally, and may have become common knowledge in the community. In this connection it should also be remembered that this is a secondary meaning. The primary meaning Nazareth / Nazarene, is evident to every Greek reader.
Hagner – Matthew, page 41-42

To clarify Matthew 2:23:

And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth, that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled: "He shall be called a Nazarene."
Matthew 2:23

The concept of *Nazarene*, being quoted as Matthew says, from the *prophets*, would be best understood to refer to all the Old Testament prophets who spoke of a Messiah to come who would rise up from the stump of Jesse.

I like to think that the Nazorean promised through Matthew's plural "prophets" was, in short, the lowly Messiah, the Suffering Servant of God whose roots were transplanted first from Bethlehem to Egypt, and then from Egypt into the parched ground of Nazareth. He who in chapter 1 was regally called "God saves" and "The With-Us-God" but now in chapter 2 is uniformly and more modestly called "The Child" and "Jesus of Nazareth" will by chapter 27, be mocked on the cross and in the next to last chapter will be called "that imposter."
Bruner – Matthew, page 78

and said, "Sir, we remember how <u>that imposter</u> said, while he was still alive, 'After three days I will rise.'"
Matthew 27:63

The response of Herod to the infant Christ stands in intentionally sharp contrast with that of the magi in the preceding passage. In Matthew's perspective, evil continually stands in opposition to the purposes of God, who in Christ brings the kingdom. At the same time, abundantly evident in our passage is the protection of the holy child by divine guidance. The gracious purposes of God cannot be thwarted; neither by the bondage of Egypt nor the tragedy of the exile could thwart them. In the history of Israel, God repeatedly brought salvation to his people, and has now brought them to the time of fulfillment - eschatological fulfillment in the one who relieves, sums up, and brings to fruition all the history and experience of his people.

The messianic Branch, the promised descendant of Daivd, toward whom all pointed, is now in the world.

Thus, according to Matthew, the plan of God unfolds. Nothing has happened by accident – all is in its proper place as it must be when the sovereign God brings salvation.