

JEWISH APOLOGETICS

Matthew 2:23, says that when Jesus moved to the town of Nazareth, this “fulfilled what was said through the prophets: ‘He will be called a Nazarene.’” There’s only one problem. The prophets never said this! Matthew actually made it up

Michael Brown’s short response:

If you’ll look closely at the text, you’ll see that Matthew does not use his normal quotation formula for citing verses from the Hebrew Bible. Normally he would be saying something like, “to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet,” making reference to a specific text in a specific prophet book. In 2:23 he says, “so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled,” indicating that he is dealing with a theme (or play on words) that occurs in several prophetic books as opposed to only one text in a specific prophetic book. With this in mind, it’s not difficult to see the sections from the Tanakh that Matthew had in mind. As always with Matthew, his insights are deep.¹

Following this, Brown links Nazareth to *netser* of Isaiah 11:1 which he notes is “a form closely related to the Hebrew word for Nazareth.” However, after some additional research I disagree with his interpretation. Let me explain.

There are four ways the New Testament quotes the Old Testament: 1) literal prophecy plus literal fulfillment; 2) literal plus typical (typology); 3) literal plus application; and 4) summation. Matthew 2:23 is the use of summation.

¹Michael L. Brown, *New Testament Objections — Volume 4*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003), 24-7. In his book, Brown lists the objection and then gives a short response which is followed by a more developed response. This DDR series, for the most part, tracks the objection and his *short* response after which you will find my comments. I highly recommend his book if you are interested in his longer responses (there is far too much material to include in this series).

The quotation is that “He should be called a Nazarene,” but this statement is not to be found anywhere in the Old Testament. Brown and others have tried to connect this with Isaiah 11:1, but that connection is far-fetched. In verse 23, Matthew uses the plural term “prophets,” so at least two references might be expected, but there is not even one. Matthew’s quotation is a summary of what the Old Testament taught. The clue is in the plural “prophets.” Matthew is not quoting, but summarizing what the prophets said. In this case, the prophets said, “He should be called a Nazarene.”

What was a Nazarene? In the first century, Nazarenes were a despised people. The term was used to reproach and to shame. This attitude is reflected in

John 1:45 Philip found Nathanael 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." ⁴⁶ And Nathanael said to him, "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see."

Nathanael’s question, “Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?” is a reflection of the low opinion people had of Nazarenes. People who were Nazarenes were despised and rejected. And what did the Prophets say about the Messiah? The Prophets did predict that the Messiah would be a despised and rejected individual. The specific term “Nazarene” is a convenient way of summarizing this teaching; not a quotation as such, but a *summary*.

In Him,

Pastor Don