

90 Nazareth

Names (also known as)

Nazareth (Greek: 'næzərəθ/; Aramaic: Naṣrath; Hebrew: נַצְרַת, Naṣrat, Arabic: النَّاصِرَة, an-Nāṣira).

Etymology

Nazareth appears in many different Greek forms in the New Testament. There is debate regarding the origin of the name. One view holds that "Nazareth" is derived from one of the Hebrew words for 'branch', namely *ne-ṣer*, נֶצֶר, and alludes to the Messianic words in Isa. 11:1, "from (Jesse's) roots a branch (*netzer*) will bear fruit." This may satisfy the requirements of Matt. 2:23.

Alternatively, the name may derive from the verb *na-ṣar*, נָצַר, "watch, guard, keep," and understood either in the sense of "watchtower" or "guard place", implying the early town was perched on or near the brow of the hill, or, in the passive sense as 'preserved, protected' in reference to its secluded position.

Location/Description



Modern-day Nazareth is nestled in a natural bowl which reaches from 1,050 feet (320 metres) above sea level to the crest of the hills about 1,600 feet (490 m). Nazareth is about 25 kilometres (16 miles) from the Sea of Galilee and about 9 kilometres (5.6 miles) west from Mount Tabor. The major cities of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv are situated approximately 146 kms (91 miles) and 108 kms (67 miles) respectively, away from Nazareth. The Nazareth Range, in which the town lies, is the southernmost of several parallel east-west hill ranges that characterize the elevated tableau of Lower Galilee.

Nazareth is the largest city in the North District of Israel. Nazareth is known as "the Arab capital of Israel"; the population is made up predominantly of Arab citizens of Israel, almost all of whom are either Muslim (69%) or Christian (30.9%). In the NT, the city is described as the childhood home of Jesus.

Scriptural references

New Testament

Matt. 3:23; 4:13; 21:11; 26:71; Mark 1:9,24; 10:47,67; 16:6; Luke 1:26; 2:4,39,51; 4:16,34; 18:37; 24:19; Jonn 1:45,46; 18:5,7; 19:19; Acts 2:22; 3:6; 4:10.

Famous characters

Joseph, Mary, Jesus and his brothers and sisters



Brief history

In Luke, Nazareth is first described as 'a city of Galilee' and home of Mary (Luke 1:26). Following the birth and early events of chapter 2 of Luke, Mary, Joseph and Jesus 'returned to Galilee, to their own city, Nazareth', where Jesus lived and developed through childhood.

The inhabitants of Galilee were looked upon contemptuously by the people of Judea because of their course dialect.

Jesus spent his boyhood years in Nazareth before beginning his ministry when he was about 30. After moving his home to Capernaum, Jesus returned to teach in the synagogue of Nazareth twice more, but was rejected both times. On one occasion the townspeople were so outraged at Jesus that they tried to throw him off a cliff to his death (Luke 4:29).



One 'cliff' near Nazareth

Around 331 Eusebius records that from the name Nazareth Christ was called a Nazoraean, and that in earlier centuries Christians, were once called Nazarenes. Tertullian (Against Marcion 4:8) records that "for this reason the Jews call us 'Nazarenes'. In the New Testament Christians are called "Christians" three times by Paul in Romans, and "Nazarenes" once by Tertullus, a Jewish lawyer. The Rabbinic and modern Hebrew name for Christians, *notzrim*, is also thought to derive from Nazareth, and be connected with Tertullus' charge against Paul of being a member of the sect of the Nazarenes, *Nazoraioi*, "men of Nazareth" in Acts 24:5.

The Gospel of Luke states Nazareth was the home village of Mary and also the site when the Angel Gabriel informed Mary that she would give birth to Jesus (Luke 1:26-27). Matthew records that Joseph and Mary resettled in Nazareth after returning from the flight from Bethlehem to Egypt (Matt. 2:23).



James F. Strange, an American archaeologist, notes: "Nazareth is not mentioned in ancient Jewish sources earlier than the third century AD. This likely reflects its lack of prominence both in Galilee and in Judaea." Strange originally calculated the population of Nazareth at the time of Christ as "roughly 1,600 to 2,000 people" but, in a subsequent publication, revised this figure down to "a maximum of about 480."

Today Nazareth is home to more than 60,000 Israeli Arabs, and Upper Nazareth is home to thousands more Jewish residents.

The lesson of Nazareth

Familiarity breeds contempt, goes the old saying. It was that way in Nazareth. Known to them for nigh on 30 years as a humble craftsman, Jesus was not recognized for who he truly was, despite the evidence. "Verily I say unto you, No prophet is accepted in his own country", the Lord felt compelled to say in the synagogue in Nazareth (Luke 4:24).

Invited to read from the scroll of the prophets, Jesus read from Isa. 61, but surprised the audience

by directing them to himself as the fulfillment of it. His final statement "This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears" (Luke 4:21), provoked a bemused response which rapidly grew into outright indignation. They knew him from age 5 when Jewish boys began to attend synagogue. How could he possibly lay claim to be Messiah?

Jesus knew they wanted proof. Reports had circulated of miracles performed in Capernaum, so he preempts their demand – "whatsoever we have heard done in Capernaum, do also here in thy country."

The key to this encounter is in his statement "This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears." Luke records, "And the eyes of all them that were in the synagogue were fastened on him." Ears hear and eyes see. They wanted to see miracles before they believed a report. So Christ brings forth the example of two Gentiles who heard distant reports and believed without seeing, namely, the widow of Zarephath and Naaman the Syrian.

"So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom. 10:17).

Outraged that he could upbraid them with Gentiles, and lay claim to Messiahship when they knew him to be just a carpenter, they sought to kill their own 'scapegoat' as Israel routinely did in the wilderness (after the Day of Atonement) by casting him over a cliff lest he wander back into their 'camp'. And this was the one who had just informed them that it was now "the year of liberty" when on the Day of Atonement every Jubilee year there was a release of 'prisoners' and the 'bound' (Luke 4:18-19).

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Smith's Bible Dictionary

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