



The Gospel of Matthew - Chapter Two

I. Matthew 1:1-2:23 - The Arrival in History of Jesus the Messiah (continues/concludes)

Summary of Chapter Two

The first half of this chapter relates an account that is played out in nativity scenes around the world every Christmas. What should not be lost in the account is that these were pagans, representing an earthly king, being divinely guided by God to pay homage to the child Messiah, while the people of God looked on, mainly with apathy.

The land was ruled by King Herod the Great at the time and he viewed this news as a threat to his power base, and so he had requested the visiting wise men to reveal the location of Christ to him so that he could have him executed. When they failed to do so, due to instruction from God, Herod had all the male children in the vicinity of Bethlehem killed.

Jesus, however, escaped the massacre as Joseph had been forewarned and instructed to take his family to safety in Egypt, where they stayed until an angel told them to return. Arriving in Judæa, they found that King Herod Archelaus was now the ruler and he still posed a threat to Jesus, so under divine guidance they relocated to Nazareth, where Jesus grew up and remained until it was time for his ministry to begin.

This brief glimpse at the Saviour's early years helps the reader to see that Jesus was persecuted and called to suffer from the outset, and that in him the word of righteousness was fulfilled, before he himself began to fulfil all righteousness.

I.c Matthew 2:1-12 - The Visit of the Wise Men

As many as two years may have passed since the events of Chapter 1, which gives a different image to that depicted in traditional nativity scenes where the men present themselves to the new born baby in the stable.

Here, Matthew highlights God's sovereign care in this infancy account of Jesus the King, recognised as such by these Gentiles. These wise men, traditionally three of them due to the three types of gifts given, although that is only speculation for some manuscripts refer to as many as fourteen such men, have become synonymous with Christmas with the account of their celestial led journey to find the child Jesus, who would bring salvation to the world; a journey that someone has coined as the first Star Trek!

¹ In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judæa, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem,

Matthew 2:1

In the time of King Herod, also commonly known as Herod I or Herod the Great, ruled Israel and Judah from 37-4BC. He was an Idumæan, a tribe descended from Edom, and was appointed king of the Jews under the authority of Rome. He ruled firmly and at times ruthlessly, murdering his own wife, several sons, other relatives and had many of the local gentry imprisoned.

Herod was a master builder, who restored the temple in Jerusalem and built many theatres, cities, palaces and fortresses. Herod's building programmes included his palace at Jericho, the fortresses of Herodium, Machærus, Sebaste, and Masada, the harbour and city of Cæsarea, but especially the Jerusalem temple. He also financed structures, including pagan temples, throughout the Roman Empire, e.g. at Antioch, Nicopolis, and Athens. Herod, ravaged by disease, died in his palace at Jericho, refer to comments made on Luke 19:1, and was buried at Herodium (Josephus, Jewish Antiquities 6.168-181).

Excavations at Herodium since the 1960s have revealed the circular palace-fortress built on its mountain, as well as the monumental buildings and huge pool below; in 2007 the excavator announced the discovery of Herod's mausoleum and sarcophagus.

Jesus was born. This simple statement by Matthew provides few clues to the lowly birth of the Messiah in a stable or cave, or the reason for it occurring in Bethlehem. Refer to Luke Chapter Two and comments made there for a fuller account of this early event in the account of Jesus.

Jesus' birth in Bethlehem of Judæa, which is situated about 6 miles or 10km south of Jerusalem, marks him as being from the tribe of Judah and from the city that produced the Davidic kings. The story of Ruth: <<*In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two sons*>> (Ruth 1:1), <<*But Ruth said, 'Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die – there will I be buried. May the Lord do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!'*>> (Ruth 1:16-19), and: <<*Just then Boaz came from Bethlehem. He said to the reapers, 'The Lord be with you.'*>> (Ruth 2:4), provides

an account of how David's great grandparents, Boaz and Ruth the Gentile, came to be in Bethlehem. That David was from Bethlehem is given in: <<*Now David was the son of an Ephrathite of Bethlehem in Judah, named Jesse, who had eight sons. In the days of Saul the man was already old and advanced in years*>> (1 Samuel 17:12-15).



The Star in the Grotto of the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem

The traditional site of Jesus' birth, a cave or grotto in Bethlehem, was made into a pagan shrine to Adonis in the 2nd Century under Hadrian. The Constantinian basilica-style Church of the Nativity replaced this shrine in the 4th Century, with an octagonal room providing views of the grotto. The 4th Century church, however, was destroyed and rebuilt as the present-day structure in the 6th Century.

It was referred to as Bethlehem of Judæa or Bethlehem of Ephrathah in Micah 5:2 to distinguish it from a second Bethlehem in the tribal land of Zebulun, as listed in the third lot of allocations in Joshua 19:10-15.

Bethlehem means 'the house of bread' and is a fitting place for the birth of the one who would be: <<*the Bread of Life*>> (John 6:48), <<*For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world*>> (John 6:33), who stated of himself: <<*I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live for ever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh*>> (John 6:51).

In earlier times, wise men, Greek *magoi*, which is the plural of *magos*, referred to priests and experts in mysteries in Persia and Babylon, and is the word used in the Septuagint version of: <<*In every matter of wisdom and understanding concerning which the king inquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom*>> (Daniel 1:20), and: <<*Daniel answered the king, 'No wise men, enchanters, magicians, or*

diviners can show to the king the mystery that the king is asking>> (Daniel 2:27), but by this time it applied to a wide range of people whose practices included astrology, dream interpretation, study of sacred writings, the pursuit of wisdom, and magic. Traditionally, these men were thought to have come from the courts of the king of Persia, perhaps from Babylon, but there is no evidence to show either their nationality or their place of origin.

Some later Greek manuscripts do indicate that these men were probably Zoroastrian, which is a Persian or Iranian religious philosophy, giving us further insight into their heritage and casting a positive light on their origin. However, many of Matthew's early readers may well have been more familiar with the term Magi as representing those who had opposed Daniel in Babylon and therefore would have had a negative view of them.

From the East. Jewish understanding of Scripture had led them to focus on their own small nation as being the sole recipients of God's grace, instead of understanding that his favour on them was intended as a platform for the knowledge of God to spread to the whole world. Here God calls pagan's from the East to worship him through his infant Son. Later he will reveal the faith of a pagan Roman from the West: <<*And to the centurion Jesus said, 'Go; let it be done for you according to your faith.'* And the servant was healed in that hour>> (Matthew 8:13). This is a reminder that the Gospel must be proclaimed to all, for God alone knows who will accept it and respond.

From the East is again language used in Scripture to support the argument of those who say these men were from Persia or neighbouring lands: <<*But to the sons of his concubines Abraham gave gifts, while he was still living, and he sent them away from his son Isaac, eastwards to the east country*>> (Genesis 25:6), and: <<*For whenever the Israelites put in seed, the Midianites and the Amalekites and the people of the east would come up against them*>> (Judges 6:3).

² asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.'

Matthew 2:2

King of the Jews. This was a title that alluded to the coming Messiah of Israel and would be the title given to Jesus around the time of his abuse and crucifixion: <<*And they began saluting him, 'Hail, King of the Jews!'*>> (Mark 15:8), and: <<*Pilate also had an inscription written and put on the cross. It read, 'Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews'*>> (John 19:19). It was common practice for the kings of other lands to pay tribute to a new king: <<*The thing itself shall be carried to Assyria as tribute to the great king. Ephraim shall be put to shame, and Israel shall be ashamed of his idol*>> (Hosea 10:6), and: <<*May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles render him tribute, may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts*>> (Psalm 72:10). If these men were indeed from Persia then they would be representing a man who was considered to be king of kings: <<*This is a copy of the letter that King Artaxerxes gave to the priest Ezra, the scribe, a scholar of the text of the commandments of the Lord and his statutes for Israel: 'Artaxerxes, king of kings, to the priest Ezra, the scribe of the law of the God of heaven: Peace. And now I decree that any of the people of Israel or their priests or Levites in my kingdom who freely offers to go to Jerusalem may go with you*>> (Ezra 7:11-13). That he should need to send men to worship

this particular King, especially as they encountered him in such meagre circumstances, speaks volumes for the prominence of Christ over all creation. After all, many men in history were born to be a king, but only one was ever born as the King!

We observed his star at its rising. The wise men would likely have been familiar with OT prophecy through interaction with Jews in Babylon, and they may have remembered Balaam's prophecy that: *<<a star shall come out of Jacob, and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel>>* (Numbers 24:17b), for he was one of their own predecessors. A dying Jacob had written: *<<The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and the obedience of the peoples is his>>* (Genesis 49:10), which was coming to fulfilment with the response of these men to the birth of Jesus. Such an observation as these men had can now perhaps be made in the hearts of all those who would seek Christ for themselves, for the light is still shining: *<<So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts>>* (2 Peter 1:19).

Both prophecies were understood by the Jews to point to a messianic deliverer, which is confirmed in the Dead Sea Scrolls, Damascus Document 7.18-21, and Testimonia 9-13. The movement of the star indicated in v.9 suggests that it was not a natural phenomenon, such as a comet, supernova, or conjunction of planets, but was supernatural, perhaps a guiding angel that appeared as a star - although it is unlikely to have been the appearing of the original angel to the shepherds, for the timing is too far out; or perhaps some specially created heavenly phenomenon that had the brightness of a star. God spoke to the shepherds through an angel and to the astrologers with a star.

Sorcery in general was forbidden in Scripture: *<<When you come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you, you must not learn to imitate the abhorrent practices of those nations. No one shall be found among you who makes a son or daughter pass through fire, or who practises divination, or is a soothsayer, or an augur, or a sorcerer, or one who casts spells, or who consults ghosts or spirits, or who seeks oracles from the dead. For whoever does these things is abhorrent to the Lord; it is because of such abhorrent practices that the Lord your God is driving them out before you. You must remain completely loyal to the Lord your God>>* (Deuteronomy 18:9-13), as was astrology in particular: *<<You are wearied with your many consultations; let those who study the heavens stand up and save you, those who gaze at the stars and at each new moon predict what shall befall you>>* (Isaiah 47:13). Without condoning either practice, or noting the skill of these men in their arts, Matthew shows that God does use such phenomena to reveal and highlight particular events to people. He used such signs to show his displeasure at the crucifixion of his Son: *<<From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon>>* (Matthew 27:45), and he will do so again: *<<The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes>>* (Joel 2:31), and: *<<That day will be a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness>>* (Zephaniah 1:15).

Have come to pay him homage or to worship him. The wise men likely travelled with a large number of attendants and guards for the long journey, which could have taken several weeks or even months, depending on their origin. For example, if they had come from Babylon by the main trade route of about 800 miles or 1,300km, averaging 20 miles or 32km per day, the journey would have taken about 40 days assuming no periods of rest and time for replenishing their supplies. They had come to pay homage to the child Jesus but not, it would appear, to King Herod. Although this is not explicit, it would surely have riled this volatile man.

³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him;

Matthew 2:3

He was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him. The arrival of this true King of the Jews presents a threat to King Herod's throne, as well as to Israel's corrupt religious and political leadership in Jerusalem. Or at least this was in their thinking for they had failed to realise that Jesus had no interest in a secular kingdom; his realm was heavenly and spiritual. He came for the hearts and minds of the people, to turn them back to God. Jesus would evoke a similar reaction of secular fear, mixed with spiritual anticipation from those who believed, toward the end of his earthly ministry: <<**When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, 'Who is this?'**>> (Matthew 21:10). Once again the religious establishment is stirred up, fearing that Jesus might usurp their power and authority, which would have had a detrimental impact on the lavish lifestyles.

The caravan of these Magi was probably very large and was sufficiently so to attract the attention of the city. Within the factual content of this story, Matthew was also alluding to the prejudice the Jews had to Gentiles showing just how nonsensical racism and elitism has always been.

⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.

Matthew 2:4

The chief priests are not the high priest but members of the priestly family and ruling Sanhedrin, who gave oversight to temple activities; scribes or Teachers of the Law were the official interpreters of the OT. The concept of 'King of the Jews' had become associated with the Messiah.

Inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. Although Herod had allegedly converted to Judaism by becoming a proselyte and should have shared in the common knowledge about the Messiah: <<**Has not the scripture said that the Messiah is descended from David and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David lived?**>> (John 7:42), he clearly did not have a deep rooted knowledge of the Scriptures and had to rely on the priests, a role that was part of their calling to office: <<**For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts**>> (Malachi 2:7).

⁵ They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judæa; for so it has been written by the prophet:

6 “And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel.””

Matthew 2:5-6

They told him. The chief priests and the scribes knew the Scriptures, yet these religious leaders made no attempt to see if this was indeed their long awaited Messiah. Such was the spiritual blindness that now impacted on these men: <<Jesus said, ‘I came into this world for judgement so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.’ Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, ‘Surely we are not blind, are we?’ Jesus said to them, ‘If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, “We see”, your sin remains>> (John 9:39-41).

It seems that, while these religious leaders did not necessarily want any harm to come to this child, they saw little relevance in him either. More than thirty years later the religious leaders did want to harm Jesus: <<It was two days before the Passover and the festival of Unleavened Bread. The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him>> (Mark 14:1). The line between taking Jesus for granted and wanting him out of the way remains as thin today. The sin of taking Jesus for granted is not a pagan sin, for they know little about him; it is the sin of those who do profess to know him.

Bethlehem was by no means least among the rulers of Judah, because it would be the birthplace of the future ruler, the Messiah. The quotation from Micah 5:2 also alludes to a shepherding theme: <<And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; and he shall be the one of peace>> (Micah 5:4-5a), also cited at David’s coronation as king over God’s people Israel: <<For some time, while Saul was king over us, it was you who led out Israel and brought it in. The Lord said to you: It is you who shall be shepherd of my people Israel, you who shall be ruler over Israel>> (2 Samuel 5:2).

7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 8 Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, ‘Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.’

Matthew 2:7-8

Herod secretly called for the wise men as he did not want to alert anyone about his plans to eliminate this perceived threat to his regal position. It is not known why the wise men were not led directly to Bethlehem but were sent via nearby Jerusalem, where they had this encounter with the author of political power at the

time. They may have naturally assumed that the Jews would have been as overjoyed as they were at the coming of their new king. Instead, their presence alerted the authorities to the arrival of the Christ. This can be seen as both positive and negative, but clearly something that God deemed necessary.

The irony should not be missed that, where the pagans here would act in the way the people of God should have, the earthly king of God's people acted in the way a pagan of old would have done, for his later actions would be reminiscent of those of Pharaoh: <<'When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live'>> (Exodus 1:16).

That he sent them to Bethlehem indicates that he wanted them to locate the child and then report their findings back to him, i.e. bring me word, so that he could have his men take the appropriate action.

I may also go and pay him homage. It is clear that Herod had no such intentions but clearly wanted to allay the fears of these visitors and did not want to alert them to the danger they would be putting the child and his parents in by informing Herod of what they would find and perceive.

⁹ When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was.

Matthew 2:9

Ahead of them, went the star. Bethlehem was only 6 miles or 10km from Jerusalem, almost directly south, so this implies very specific, localised guidance from the travelling star, which came to rest over the young Jesus' specific location. The guidance of this star would have been reminiscent of the way God had led his people during the wilderness years: <<*The Lord went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, so that they might travel by day and by night*>> (Exodus 13:21).

¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.

Matthew 2:10

They would have been overwhelmed with joy because they knew that, once the star had stopped, their pilgrimage would be at an end; they would have found the promised Christ of God that was the objective of their journey: <<*Glory in his holy name; let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice*>> (Psalm 105:3).

It is quite clear that the journey had been divinely ordained and that they had been given both revelation about the birth of the Messiah and the knowledge that the star was to be their guide to his location. It is not known how God had revealed this to them but he clearly had.

¹¹ On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Matthew 2:11

On entering the house. The wise men did not arrive at the time of Jesus' birth in a manger, but up to two years later, when Jesus was living in a house. Since it is known that Herod died before Passover in 4BC then Jesus' birth could have been no later than that date and it seems most likely, from other information about Jesus' age when his ministry began, the reigns of other leaders at the end of Jesus' life and the timing of his crucifixion on a Friday that was preparation day for the Passover, then 6-5BC are the favoured years for Jesus' birth.

Paid him homage. It is doubtful that these quasi-pagan religious men understood Jesus' true divine nature, but their actions were unknowingly appropriate and wonderfully foreshadowed the worship of Jesus by all the Gentile nations: <<**Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit**>> (Matthew 28:19), <<**But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judæa and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth**>> (Acts 1:8), <<**through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name**>> (Romans 1:5), <<**Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father**>> (Philippians 2:9-11), <<**After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands**>> (Revelation 7:9), and: <<**The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it**>> (Revelation 21:24).

It is interesting to note that they worshipped him *before* offering him gifts. This was just a young child, not even dressed as a regal prince and yet they paid him homage. Isaiah had written of the Messiah: <<**For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him**>> (Isaiah 53:2), yet to these men: <<**The brightness was like the sun; rays came forth from his hand, where his power lay hidden**>> (Habakkuk 3:4).

Gold, frankincense and myrrh. The number of gifts contributed to the tradition that there were three men, but the actual number is unknown as previously noted. Although these gifts may have been standard in Eastern tradition the words of Isaiah cannot be ignored once again, for they fit the whole scenario portrayed here by Matthew: <<**A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord**>> (Isaiah 60:6).

The three gifts are symbolic in that gold is a gift fit for a king; frankincense is a gift fit for God, as it can be burnt on his altar as will be discussed; and myrrh is the gift for the man for it can be used to embalm his body after crucifixion.

Given this wealth that Joseph and Mary now had access to and the Scriptures: <<When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, 'Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord'), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, 'a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons'>> (Luke 2:22-24), and: <<also two turtle-doves or two pigeons, such as he can afford, one for a sin-offering and the other for a burnt-offering>> (Leviticus 14:22), show that they were poor when Christ was presented at the temple, thereby supporting that these wise men did not appear before Jesus while he was still a newborn baby, otherwise Joseph would have offered a lamb to God as their sacrifice.

Frankincense is resin used ceremonially for the only incense permitted on the altar: <<You shall not offer unholy incense on it, or a burnt-offering, or a grain-offering; and you shall not pour a drink-offering on it>> (Exodus 30:9), and: <<The Lord said to Moses: Take sweet spices, stacte, and onycha, and galbanum, sweet spices with pure frankincense (an equal part of each), and make an incense blended as by the perfumer, seasoned with salt, pure and holy; and you shall beat some of it into powder, and put part of it before the covenant in the tent of meeting where I shall meet you; it shall be for you most holy. When you make incense according to this composition, you shall not make it for yourselves; it shall be regarded by you as holy to the Lord. Whoever makes any like it to use as perfume shall be cut off from the people>> (Exodus 30:34-38).

Myrrh is sap used in incense and perfume, and as a stimulant tonic. It was also part of the mixture of spices used for embalming, and was used on Jesus' own body: <<Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds>> (John 19:39).

The gold was likely used providentially to support the family in their flight to Egypt (vv.13-15).

¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Matthew 2:12

Having been warned in a dream. It seems that an angel had appeared to them, in a similar way to which it had instructed Joseph: <<But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit'>> (Matthew 1:20), as well as in v.13, but on this occasion to provide a warning of what Herod intended should they reveal the location and identity of the child Jesus.

I.d Matthew 2:13-23 -
OT prophecies are fulfilled in Jesus the Messiah

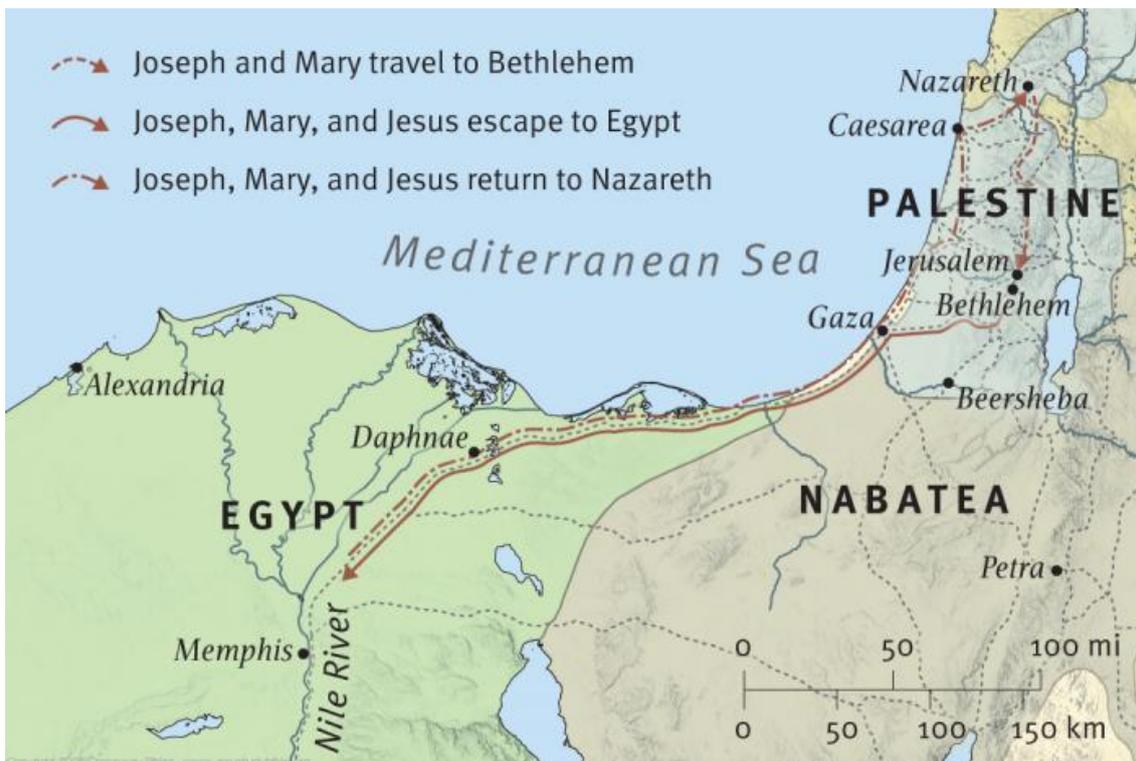
Using direct quotations from Scripture, Matthew explains how Jesus' personal history repeats certain aspects of Israel's national history.

Matthew here narrates God's protection for Jesus (vv.13-15), and Herod's brutal massacre of other children (vv.16-18). Although the narrative rings with inspired grief and rage against Herod's act, God does not stop the injustice in this narrative any more than in so many of the narratives played out every day around the world.

Yet this narrative contains a kernel of good news that human reporters often cannot adequately discern until after the fact: the injustice of a world run by the enemies of God cannot thwart his ultimate purposes for justice in that world.

I.d.i Matthew 2:13-15 - The Escape to Egypt

Joseph was instructed to take his family and flee to Egypt to avoid Herod. It is not known how long they spent there but it seems a relatively short stay as Scripture indicates that when Jesus went to Jerusalem at age 12 he had been there many times before: **<<Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival>>** (Luke 2:41-42).



The travels of Joseph and Mary

¹³ Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.'

Matthew 2:13

After they had left refers to the wise men starting their return journey, when they are subsequently lost to history.

Flee to Egypt. The Egyptian border lay approximately 90 miles or 150km from Bethlehem. Jesus and his family would be safe from Herod the Great in Egypt, since it was outside of his jurisdiction. Egypt had often been a place where Judæans would flee as a last resort: <<*but Hadad fled to Egypt with some Edomites who were servants of his father. He was a young boy at that time*>> (1 Kings 11:17), <<*And when King Jehoiakim, with all his warriors and all the officials, heard his words, the king sought to put him to death; but when Uriah heard of it, he was afraid and fled and escaped to Egypt*>> (Jeremiah 26:21).

With the defeat of Mark Antony and Cleopatra by Augustus in 31BC, Egypt had become part of the Roman Empire a year later. Therefore, travel between two states in the empire could easily go unnoticed, especially for this small family.

Remain there until I tell you would have given Joseph confidence that he was not going to be abandoned in a foreign land but would be allowed to return to his homeland at an appropriate time.

To destroy him reveals Herod's true intention and not the lies that he had told to the Magi. It is not surprising that Herod would want to rid himself of someone he did not know, whom others proclaimed would take his kingdom. History has shown that there have been many more ordinary people who have not wanted him to become the Lord, especially not of their own lives! Such rage by kings against God was not new either for God spoke to the Assyrian king Sennacherib through the prophet: <<*I know your rising up and your sitting down, your going out and coming in, and your raging against me*>> (Isaiah 37:28). Herod thus becomes synonymous with the great red dragon: <<*His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth. Then the dragon stood before the woman who was about to bear a child, so that he might devour her child as soon as it was born*>> (Revelation 12:4).

¹⁴ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, ¹⁵ and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I have called my son.'

Matthew 2:14-15

Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt is something that is only recorded in Matthew's Gospel, as Luke records no details between Jesus' presentation at the Temple at about six weeks old and a subsequent visit to Jerusalem at the age of twelve. Whatever the family had achieved in terms of business or home in the time they had been in Bethlehem would have been abandoned as they were fleeing as refugees. The gift of gold from the wise men would at least have paid for their time in Egypt, showing God's provision for them during this phase of Jesus' early life.

In the western world it seems that many people have become hardened to the plight of others around the world who are refugees because of political, ethnic or religious reasons. Such people are impoverished and often live without hope. Others of course do not even survive to become refugees, as they are slaughtered by the regimes the refugees are fleeing. Yet within this early story that shows that even the child Christ had to experience such deprivation, there lies a message that produces hope in a world for those who do recognise who he is and what he has to offer.

By night could indicate the immediacy of Jacob's response to take the family to safety, using darkness as a shield, or it could represent the common practice of travelling after dark when it was much cooler than it would be in daytime if this journey was undertaken in summer, or it could represent both.

Fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet. The prophet Hosea recounted how God had faithfully brought Israel out of Egypt in the Exodus in Hosea 11:1, which Matthew cites here by comparing Israel as God's son being rescued and delivered, just as God had instructed Moses: <<*Then you shall say to Pharaoh, "Thus says the Lord: Israel is my firstborn son"*>> (Exodus 4:22), with Jesus, who was the One who would be revealed as God's true Son: <<*And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth*>> (John 1:14), and: <<*No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known*>> (John 1:18).

That Matthew applies this Scripture to Jesus is quite deliberate and not a ploy to mislead, for the Israelites longed for the second exodus that was also prophesied in Scripture, as was the people's demise recorded by Moses: <<*The Lord uprooted them from their land in anger, fury, and great wrath, and cast them into another land, as is now the case*>> (Deuteronomy 29:28). Yet he also held out a message of great hope to them: <<*When all these things have happened to you, the blessings and the curses that I have set before you, if you call them to mind among all the nations where the Lord your God has driven you, and return to the Lord your God, and you and your children obey him with all your heart and with all your soul, just as I am commanding you today, then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you, gathering you again from all the peoples among whom the Lord your God has scattered you*>> (Deuteronomy 30:1-3).

Many other prophets spoke of a new exodus to come through the Messiah, although those of Hosea seem most fitting here and are brought to mind by what Matthew wrote: <<*From there I will give her her vineyards, and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope. There she shall respond as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt*>> (Hosea 2:15), and: <<*They shall come trembling like birds from Egypt, and like doves from the land of Assyria; and I will return them to their homes, says the Lord*>> (Hosea 11:11).

This double fulfilment of Scripture shows that God can fulfil Scriptures in many ways and at diverse times in history. Therefore, we should not be too dogmatic as to how we interpret them. As King Solomon wrote: <<*What has been is what*

will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun>> (Ecclesiastes 1:9).

That God should choose Egypt as a safe haven for his young Son is not surprising as it was his choice for his young family almost two thousand years earlier when he spoke to an elderly Jacob: <<*Then he said, 'I am God, the God of your father; do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make of you a great nation there>> (Genesis 46:3). Of course, God could have sent them anywhere he chose for: <<The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it>> (Psalm 24:1), but it seems that Egypt had a special place in his heart: <<On that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the Lord of hosts has blessed, saying, 'Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage'>> (Isaiah 19:24-25).*

Many modern Jews will argue that it was God bringing them back to Israel in 1947 that marked this second exodus and not the coming of Christ. Whatever viewpoint an individual may take to the restoration and survival of Israel in the 20th Century and since, it clearly has God's signature on it, even if some of the people have again made a mess of the opportunity it affords them.

I.d.ii Matthew 2:16-18 - The Massacre of the Infants

Apart from some garbled allusion to this by the 5th Century Roman writer Macrobius, there is no evidence for this account in historical records, such as those written by Josephus, other than here in Matthew's Gospel. However, infanticide is not unusual either culturally or globally and occurs in most generations.

Fresh in the minds of Jews would have been such a slaughter of Jewish children by Antiochus IV Epiphanes during the time of the Maccabees. Men like Herod have existed throughout history and their wickedness has no recognition of race, age or gender. Herod even killed his own sons Alexander, Aristobulus and Antipater.

There are many well documented high profile atrocities attributed to Herod, all of them having national or international impact, so it is not surprising that the death of a few very young children in a small village should go unreported, however abhorrent it may appear to most people.

¹⁶ When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men.

Matthew 2:16

Killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under. The small village may have had 10 to 30 boys of that age. Herod the Great's earlier query to the wise men about the time of the appearing of the star (v.7) gave him an estimated time of birth for his potential challenger. According to the traditions of some churches, these infants had become the first Christian martyrs, their blood shed unknowingly for the sake of Christ.

There are many people who understandably ask why God allows such tragedies and atrocities to occur. There are many answers offered by both theologians and disciples alike but the truth is that no one really knows. Scripture gives an insight as to how God suffers with his people in their pain, but who suffers with him at times like this when he knows that he is the reason given by the perpetrators for such evil acts as these that occur so frequently it seems.

That Josephus did not recount this story is not unusual for he was a zealous Jew and would not have wanted to necessarily highlight Christian history. However, it should be noted that he wrote after the publication of Matthew's Gospel and he did not contest the account either. The same can be said for other Jewish documents from that era. It would be thought that the opponents of Christ and the subsequent growth of the church would have picked up on any anomalies in the Gospels to help support their claims against Jesus as the Christ. Silence is often a compelling witness!

It is written that Augustus Cæsar, knowing of Herod's killing of children including his own sons stated: 'It is better to be one of Herod's pigs than his son'.

¹⁷ Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

¹⁸ 'A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.'

Matthew 2:17-18

In the passage Matthew quotes from, which is Jeremiah 31:15, the prophet used personification of Jacob's beloved wife Rachel to describe the mothers of Israel, mourning for their children who had either been killed or removed from the land and carried off into Babylonian exile by Nebuzaradan, leaving Israel no longer a nation and considered dead. Like the exile, the attempt on Jesus' life was intended to wipe out the chosen one of God.

Rachel died giving birth to Jacob's youngest son Benjamin in the vicinity of Bethlehem: <<*So Rachel died, and she was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem)*>> (Genesis 35:19), marking the first mention of this small settlement in the land allocated to descendants of her stepson Judah, the son of her sister Leah by Jacob. Rachel originally named her son *Benoni*, meaning 'son of my sorrow' linking to her wailing and loud lamentation, but her husband Jacob later changed his name to *Benjamin*, 'the son of my right hand'. Jesus is now at the right hand of His Father: <<*Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear*>> (Acts 2:33).

Jeremiah Chapter 31 overall is a passage of great hope for the people of God and this should be considered when reading Matthew's account of this atrocity. Within that chapter the prophet speaks of the return of his people: <<*Thus*

says the Lord: Keep your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears; for there is a reward for your work, says the Lord: they shall come back from the land of the enemy; there is hope for your future, says the Lord: your children shall come back to their own country>> (Jeremiah 31:16-17), and of them still being his son: <<Is Ephraim my dear son? Is he the child I delight in? As often as I speak against him, I still remember him. Therefore I am deeply moved for him; I will surely have mercy on him, says the Lord>> (Jeremiah 31:20), which refers to the nation of Israel rather than Judah, who were taken off into Assyrian captivity many years before. This chapter also declares there will be a new covenant, recorded in Jeremiah 31:31-34.

In his incarnation, Jesus identified not only with humanity in an abstract sense but with the history of a people that is also spiritually the history of all believers because they have been grafted into that history and use their Scriptures. A fact that holds out hope for all Jews who have not yet embraced Jesus as the Christ: <<For if you have been cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these natural branches be grafted back into their own olive tree>> (Romans 11:24).

It may be suspected that this identification speaks of a God who feels human pain as deeply as they do. While philosophers and theologians must address the problem of evil intellectually, many grieving people inside and outside the church face it existentially. To broken people wounded by this world's evil, Jesus' sharing of their pain offers a consolation deeper than reasoned arguments. God truly understands and cares, and paid an awful price to hold out hope of making things better, even during earthly life: <<For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin>> (Hebrews 4:15).

I.d.iii Matthew 2:19-23 - The Return from Egypt

No detail is given as to the duration or location of their stay in Egypt, although the language would indicate it was quite short. The family it seems intended on returning to Bethlehem but the political situation there determined that it would be safer to relocate back to Galilee.

¹⁹ When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said,

Matthew 2:19

As already noted Herod died in 4BC, which may indicate that Joseph was in Egypt for only a few months; that an angel of the Lord appeared suddenly suggests this to be the case.

Some believe that Herod died within three months of the massacre of the children, although there is no means of verifying this. It is known that he killed his son Antipater just five days before his own very painful death. A tyrant will die a tyrant's death, but God is sovereign over all things: <<I, I am he who comforts you; why then are you afraid of a mere mortal who must die, a

human being who fades like grass? You have forgotten the Lord, your Maker, who stretched out the heavens and laid the foundations of the earth. You fear continually all day long because of the fury of the oppressor, who is bent on destruction. But where is the fury of the oppressor?>> (Isaiah 51:12-13), for death is the great leveller in this life: <<There the wicked cease from troubling, and there the weary are at rest>> (Job 3:17).

This account also shows that no one is out of sight of God. The angel came to Joseph in Egypt, to Ezekiel in Babylon, to John on Patmos and to Paul in the middle of a violent storm on the Mediterranean Sea. It may make Jonah's attempted action laughable: <<But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord>> (Jonah 1:3), but it does bring great hope to all who live in a broken world to know that God is close by at all times.

²⁰ 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead.'²¹ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel.

Matthew 2:20-21

Those who were seeking the child's life are dead. It is not clear whether this refers to the chief priests as well as Herod the Great, or simply that his edict to have Jesus killed had died with him, as was usual practice when a ruler died. Those reading Matthew's account and who were steeped in Scripture and thus Israelite history would immediately recognise the call of God in this angelic command: <<The Lord said to Moses in Midian, 'Go back to Egypt; for all those who were seeking your life are dead.' So Moses took his wife and his sons, put them on a donkey, and went back to the land of Egypt; and Moses carried the staff of God in his hand>> (Exodus 4:19-20).

Go to the land of Israel. Israel as a nation had long ceased to exist and it may be that Judæa was the intended destination for Joseph although Galilee had been part of Israel, so the fact that Joseph would eventually go to Nazareth would not have been in breach of this command.

Although Jesus' experience as a refugee was relatively short-lived and it seems that he subsequently had a secure childhood, his later words give insight to the reality of his situation here on earth: <<And Jesus said to him, 'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head'>> (Luke 9:58).

²² But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judæa in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee.

Matthew 2:22

Archelaus, one of Herod the Great's sons, succeeded Herod's rule only over part of his former kingdom: Judæa, Samaria and Idumæa, and he ruled from 4BC to AD6. He was hated by the Jews and displayed the same kind of cruelty that had

characterised his father's reign. According to Josephus he had up to 3,000 people killed in Jerusalem for sedition on a single occasion while they were mourning the deaths of two priests and 40 youths who had removed an eagle that his father had installed above the temple's entrance, something seen as blasphemy by the Jews. Eventually, due to the continued mistreatment of the people by Archelaus, Cæsar Augustus, fearing a revolution by the people, deposed and banished him to Vienna in Gaul.

After being warned in a dream. It was not the fear that Joseph had but further revelation that caused him to relocate to Galilee. Even though Herod was now dead, persecution would always remain a constant threat to Jesus. It would also become a feature of the lives of those who choose to follow Jesus, as he and others have taught: *<<Then Jesus told his disciples, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?>> (Matthew 16:24-26), <<Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we decided to be left alone in Athens; and we sent Timothy, our brother and co-worker for God in proclaiming the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you for the sake of your faith, so that no one would be shaken by these persecutions. Indeed, you yourselves know that this is what we are destined for>> (1 Thessalonians 3:1-3), and: <<Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice in so far as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed>> (1 Peter 4:12-13). In fact, the promise in Scripture is: <<Indeed, all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted>> (1 Timothy 3:12).*

Went away to the district of Galilee. Jacob took a common sense decision, based on the warning given to him by the angel; perhaps being aware of the sound advice of King Solomon: *<<The clever see danger and hide; but the simple go on, and suffer for it>> (Proverbs 22:3 and 27:12).* Galilee was ruled by another son of Herod, the tetrarch Antipas who would be a significant threat to Jesus and his followers but not to the infant. He ruled from 4BC to around AD39, being directly responsible for the killing of the apostle James Zebedee. He is mentioned as ruling at the time John the Baptist commenced his ministry: *<<In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judæa, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituræa and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness>> (Luke 3:1-2).*

²³ There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, 'He will be called a Nazorean.'

Matthew 2:23

A town called Nazareth, shows that it was not a location that was well known to the readers of the Gospel and is located in the lower Galilæan hills halfway between the Mediterranean Sea and the Sea of Galilee. It was a relatively small village and population estimates vary from 200 to 1,600. Scripture indicates that Mary at least came originally from Nazareth: <<*In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary*>> (Luke 1:26-27), and: <<*When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth*>> (Luke 2:39), and that Joseph either settled there with her or was also a native. After the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, which was Joseph's ancestral home as he was from the tribe of Judah, it may have been that they had decided to settle there until the issue with Herod had arisen.

Excavations at Nazareth have located tombs, olive presses, wells and vaulted cells for wine and oil storage, indicating that the village was a small agricultural settlement. Nazareth was located on a road leading from the nearby Hellenised town of Sepphoris into Samaria.

The current Church of the Annunciation lies above previous early Byzantine church structures and caves from the 4th Century or possibly earlier. These commemorated the early life of Jesus and his family.



The Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth

He would be called a Nazorean or Nazarene. Matthew is not quoting any specific OT prophecy but is referring to a general theme in the OT prophets. Thus Matthew is saying that the OT prophets foretold that the Messiah would be despised: <<*But I am a worm, and not human; scorned by others, and despised by the people*>> (Psalm 22:6), <<*Thus says the Lord, the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One, to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, the slave of rulers, 'Kings shall see and stand up, princes, and they shall prostrate themselves, because of the Lord, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you'*>>

(Isaiah 49:7), <<He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account>> (Isaiah 53:3), and: <<After the sixty-two weeks, an anointed one shall be cut off and shall have nothing, and the troops of the prince who is to come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary. Its end shall come with a flood, and to the end there shall be war. Desolations are decreed>> (Daniel 9:26), comparable to the way in which the town of Nazareth was despised or ridiculed at least in the time of Jesus: <<Nathanael said to him, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' Philip said to him, 'Come and see'>> (John 1:46), <<Others said, 'This is the Messiah.' But some asked, 'Surely the Messiah does not come from Galilee, does he?'>> (John 7:41), and: <<They replied, 'Surely you are not also from Galilee, are you? Search and you will see that no prophet is to arise from Galilee'>> (John 7:52).

Matthew may have also intended a wordplay connecting the word Nazorean to many OT messianic prophecies, including: <<On that day the branch of the Lord shall be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land shall be the pride and glory of the survivors of Israel>> (Isaiah 4:2), and: <<A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots>> (Isaiah 11:1), since Nazorean, the Greek *Netzar*, sounds like the word for branch in Hebrew, which was a designation for the Messiah. It is also used by Jeremiah and Zechariah for such allusions.

Nazorean has no evident connection with the OT Nazirite vow: <<Speak to the Israelites and say to them: When either men or women make a special vow, the vow of a Nazirite, to separate themselves to the Lord>> (Numbers 6:2), and: <<for you shall conceive and bear a son. No razor is to come on his head, for the boy shall be a nazirite to God from birth. It is he who shall begin to deliver Israel from the hand of the Philistines>> (Judges 13:5), which is spelled differently, has no messianic significance, and has no connection with the town of Nazareth. Jesus was certainly not a Nazirite as he drank wine, associated openly with sinners and touched dead bodies.

By choosing the culturally insignificant and even ridiculed town of Nazareth to be the location for the Saviour's early years and place of the significant statement to truly announce his mission: <<When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.' And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing'>> (Luke 4:16-21). God allows the NT writers to also make a statement about how people view others in their world: <<But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong>> (1 Corinthians 1:27).