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He Shall Be Called a Nazorean: Intertextuality without an Intertext?

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Inexact quotations are a common phenomenon in Biblical intertextuality, and some suspected allusions are so fleeting and/or imprecise as to leave interpreters wondering whether an allusion was intended or not. But in at least one instance, Matthew 2:23, we have a reference to something unspecified prophets are supposed to have said, namely that “He shall be called a Nazorean,” which may not in fact have any intertext at all.¹

Spurious and unidentified quotations may result from several possible scenarios, or a combination of them:

- (1) Some represent things that are genuinely thought to be in the Bible, including things heard and assumed to be from the Bible. Many scholars have had students or other interested individuals ask them “Doesn’t it say in the Bible...?” to which the answer was simply “No.”
- (2) Another category are things which a particular individual or group is sure “must be” or “should be” in Scripture, because there are doctrines or practices which are so central to their beliefs that, even if no specific quotation has ever been offered in their support, it is assumed that such a textual basis for the belief or practice exists in the Bible somewhere.
- (3) A third category are things known not to be in the Bible, but nevertheless deceptively claimed as being in Scripture.

In the case of Matthew 2:23, the form of the “citation” itself suggests that the author was aware that something was different in this particular case: In contrast with other quotations in Matthew’s Gospel, here alone the author uses the plural “prophets.” Other characteristic features of Matthean Scriptural quotations are likewise absent (such as the reference to a singular prophet being followed by the

¹ Another possible example of the same phenomenon is found in 1 Corinthians 14:34, which says “women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, *as the law also says.*” In Josephus’ *Against Apion* 2.201 we find something rather similar: “The woman, *says the Law*, is in all things inferior to the man. Let her accordingly be submissive, not for her humiliation, but that she may be directed; for the authority has been given by God to man.” Both instances claim to be offering something that “the law says” and yet which the Law does not.

participle λέγοντος).² Nevertheless, however much there may be features that distinguish this reference from others that precede or follow it, the reference to prophets having said something of this sort is offered in the context of other Scriptural quotations that are identifiable. This suggests that Matthew genuinely thought he was quoting prophets, and/or wanted to give that impression to readers.

Given that it is possible to imagine that there is a text that says X, Y or Z when in fact there isn't, it seems inappropriate to assume that there must be some text, play on words, or other connection with Scriptural language, however slim or tendentious, that was in view. The most famous example is of course the suggestion that Matthew is here alluding vaguely to the idea of the Messiah as the "Branch."³ Since the best candidates for possible references are *far from obviously* what Matthew had in mind, we might do better instead to first ask what issue or motivation might have led an author to make such a tendentious connection,⁴ or perhaps even invent a fictitious Scripture. In other words, we should begin with the Gospel's wording, emphases and context, try to ascertain the point the text seems to make, discuss the language and terminology used, and only thereafter ask whether any text or group of texts may have actually been in mind, realizing that it may not ultimately be possible to answer that question.

It is often assumed that Matthew's aim in 2:23 is to account for Jesus' connection with Nazareth (the fact that he was known as "Jesus of Nazareth") when the Messiah was expected to come from Bethlehem. And we should not altogether exclude that as *one* of Matthew's concerns. But it may also be that Matthew was also using the connection with Nazareth as a solution to another problem, the accusation that Jesus was a "Nazorean," whatever connotations that may have had. If both of these were issues of concern, he may have been able to kill two birds with one stone - even if the stone in question was a citation of a non-existent Scripture. I mention this possibility because the term Matthew uses at this point is linguistically intriguing, and for many readers has created intertextual connections not with unidentified prophets, but with other texts in which a similar term is used.

² Maarten J. J. Menken, "The Sources of the Old Testament Quotation in Matthew 2:23" *JBL* 120/3 (2001) 451-468 (here pp. 451-2).

³ Eric Laupot, in a recent article on Tacitus' reference to Christianity which uses the term "branch", assumes that these terms are "transliterations" of a Semitic term, to which the only response can be "no it is not, at least not in any straightforward sense." Laupot, Eric. "Tacitus' fragment 2: the anti-Roman movement of the Christiani and the Nazoreans." *Vigiliae christianae* 54, no. 3 (January 1, 2000): 233-247 (here 240). *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost* (accessed October 13, 2010). If one possible meaning notsrin may have had is "those of the branch", another etymology has been proposed, treating nasoraia as deriving from nasar, "to guard", and thus having the meaning of "the observant" or perhaps "the faithful" (i.e. those who guard the truth, or keep secrets). So H. Kuhli in EDNT p.456. In the case of the Mandaean, it might have the sense of "those who observe (the baptismal rites)". It also might have arisen somewhat ironically, since the Mandaean practice diverges from that of Jewish Law.

⁴ Note too the possibility that the Hebrew text of Jeremiah 31:6-7 (כִּי יִשְׂיִים, קָרְאוּ נֹצְרִים בְּהַר אֶפְרַיִם) is in view, since it combines *nošerîm* and calling as well as a geographical reference to northern Israel, all in a passage that is adjacent to one Matthew had already quoted earlier (Davies and Allison, *Matthew* vol.1, pp.279-280, citing E. Zolli). Matthew's "quotation" probably consisted of two or perhaps three words (ὅτι Ναζωραῖος κληθήσεται. See Menken, "OT Quotation in Matthew 2:23" 455.); those words correspond closely to what we find in Jeremiah, including an equivalent for the Greek *hoti* in the Hebrew *kî*.

And so let us now turn our attention to the term *Ναζωραῖος* found in Matthew. Not only those who read the New Testament in English (where two words are often translated in identical fashion), but even those of us who read it in Greek might easily miss certain philological and etymological issues.⁵ There is perhaps no question that *Ναζαρηνοσ* could work as a way of denoting someone from the village which was frequently called *Ναζαρα* in Greek, as well as the more familiar *Ναζαρεθ*.⁶ But that term is not used by Matthew. What about the term Matthew *does* use, *Ναζωραῖος*? The long “ο” sound has often been noted as hard to account for in terms of derivation from any known form of Nazareth.

“Nazoraean” (*Ναζωραῖος*) is found outside the current passage in Matthew 26:71; Luke 18:37; John 18:5, 7; 19:19; Acts 2:22; 3:6; 4:10; 6:14; 22:8; 26:9. “Nazarene” (*Ναζαρηνοσ*) is found in Mark 1:24; 10:47; 14:67; 16:6; Luke 4:34; 24:19; John 18:5 D).⁷ To be noted is that Mark always uses *Ναζαρηνοσ*, Matthew and John always use *Ναζωραῖος* while Luke uses both, although the latter alone is used in Acts. Acts uses it once in the plural, when Paul is accused of being a “ringleader of the sect of the Nazoreans.”

It seems necessary to differ with William Albright’s statement that “The problem is basically simple: can the Aramaic form underlying *Ναζωραῖος* be a gentilic of the form underlying *Ναζαρεθ*?”⁸ The issue cannot be simply whether it is possible to create an unlikely but just barely possible scenario for the derivation of this term from the place name. We must also ask whether that derivation is *likely* and whether Matthew may not be the one *trying to turn Nazorean into a geographic designation* when it originally meant something else. Presumably if he attempted to do so, it must have seemed at least somewhat plausible in his time to interpret Nazorean in this way. But that doesn’t mean that the term already had that meaning, or that it in fact derived from the place name, rather than the association coming about through Matthew’s own effort and word-play.

Most commentaries mention at least in passing that there is a term that provides a very close correspondent to the word *Nazōraios* used in Matthew and Acts. One of the terms used by the Mandaeans to refer to holders of their secret wisdom is *našurai* (ܢܫܘܪܝܐ). Mandaic is a dialect of

⁵ See for instance Talbert, *Reading Matthew*, p.31, where he treats the derivation as straightforward.

⁶ It may be unhelpful to play the terms “Nazarenos” and “Nazoraios” off against one another. If we think of other Semitic sectarian designations from the second temple period, the variant forms *Εσσηνοι*, *Εσσαίοι*, and *Οσσαιοι* quickly come to mind (See for instance Francois de Blois, “Našrānī (Ναζωραῖος) and ḥanīf (εθνικός): Studies on the Religious Vocabulary of Christianity and of Islam” *BSOAS* 65:1 (2002) 1-30 (here p.1).. And in Daniel and Talmudic literature, *gazarenoi*, *gazeriyn* and *gazeraiia* (M. Gertner, “The Terms “Pharisaioi, Gazarenoi, Hupokritai”: Their Semantic Complexity and Conceptual Correlation” *BSOAS* 26: 2 (1963) 245-26 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/61229>). In the case of some other sect names, connections with place names have also been proposed as providing their meaning and origin: Pharisees as meaning “Persians”, for instance, or “Mandaeans” having some connection to “Medes” (see Gertner p.249). And of course, as Kennard points out, religious movements do not, as a rule, take their name from the place their founder was from (“Nazorean and Nazareth” *JBL* 66 (1947) 79).

⁷ Davies and Allison vol.1 p.276.

⁸ W. F. Albright, “The Names “Nazareth” and “Nazoraean”” *JBL* 65 (1946) 397-398.

Aramaic, and the *wa* (equivalent of Hebrew or Aramaic *vav*) is regularly used to represent both a “u” and a long “o” sound.⁹

Yet the earliest Mandaean textual sources have been dated, on the basis of scribal colophons in manuscripts, to around the third century CE. They are thus impossible to connect directly with the Gospel of Matthew. And so let me make clear before proceeding that I am not suggesting that we have evidence that the Mandaeans as such existed in the time Matthew’s Gospel was written. That is certainly *possible*, but there cannot be said to be conclusive evidence for adopting such a stance. But the Mandaean use of a term so similar to one found in the New Testament is nevertheless intriguing. And it is unlikely that the Mandaeans adopted the term from Christians, given their negative view of Jesus. Also relevant is the evidence from Epiphanius, who tends to use *Ναζωραίοι* for the Jewish Christian sect, perhaps under the influence of the New Testament.¹⁰ But he also mentions a Jewish sect he calls Nasaraeans, which he is careful to distinguish from Christians and says pre-dated the time of Christianity.¹¹ The key issue is not whether and to what extent there was continuity between the meaning of a term *našurai* in Matthew’s time and some centuries later. We may recognize that terms such as Nazorean, Christian, and Pharisee, to name but a few, evolved over the centuries, as did groups connected with those labels, and yet still find reason to trace the terms across those centuries.¹² And so leaving to one side specific uses from later times, we still have the question whether *našurai* is likely to have been a term or designation already in use in the first century, if not indeed earlier, independently of and prior to the rise of Christianity. If this seems probable, then it also becomes likely that Matthew is doing more in the passage we’re looking at than simply discussing Jesus’ connection with Nazareth.

In Mandaean texts the term *našurai* refers to individuals skilled in esoteric knowledge (often spoken of as the purview of priests as opposed to laypeople). And when we combine a closer look at Mandaean sources and Epiphanius, with a closer consideration of key Matthean themes and emphases, some interesting convergences become apparent amid what one could well refer to as an “intertextual exploration of intertextuality without an intertext.”

So let us turn our attention back to Matthew’s Gospel. We may not have an intertext of the sort we are initially led to expect in 2:23. But we do have a context in which Matthew’s Gospel regularly cites other texts, and patterns have been detected in this Gospel’s use of such Scriptural citations. We may or may not wish to put the matter in terms of authorial intent, but certainly merely considering the broader context of the Matthean infancy stories, we find ourselves in a wider framework of narrative punctuated by references to fulfillment of prophecy. And our perception of what is going on in Matthew 2:23 can and *should* be shaped by this preceding context.

⁹ Lawrence Zalcman points out that the same sorts of difficulties exist in trying to derive the Talmudic *notsri* from Nazareth as exist in the Greek form. Lawrence Zalcman, “Christians, Nošerim, and Nebuchadnezzar’s Daughter” *JQR* ns 81:3/4 (1991) 411-42 (here p. 411).

¹⁰ <http://patrologia.narod.ru/patrolog/epiphan/panarion.htm>

¹¹ Shirley Jackson Case (in a work online at <http://evans-experientialism.freewebspace.com/case02.htm>) mentions

¹² Even the term “Mandaeans” is of uncertain derivation – it might mean something like “Gnostics,” but it may also derive from the *manda*, the cultic hut used in conjunction with the baptismal ritual.

Of course, interpreters have reached widely varied conclusions about those other references to prophecy and its fulfillment. If we conclude that Matthew is in each instance ignoring original context and making claims that Jesus was predicted in texts which, in their original context, clearly meant nothing of the sort, then we will probably view Matthew 2:23 as simply another case (or perhaps the *worst* but by no means unique case) of Matthew “pulling a fast one.” If, on the other hand, we believe that this Gospel means something more like typology than prediction when it refers to prophecy and fulfillment, then we may lean more towards the conclusion that here Matthew genuinely thought there was a typology to be seen in Scripture, somewhere, that related to this subject. And that could then lead us to ask whether there is anything at all, however poorly misremembered, that might fit what Matthew’s Gospel has been doing in this section. But it should also, and perhaps more importantly, lead us to ask how being called a Nazorean relates to the broader theme of Jesus recapitulating the story of Moses and/or Israel, which seems to be a theme uniting many of the other Scriptural quotations and echoes in this part of the Gospel. And if this last instance *cannot* be made sense of in those terms, it might perhaps suggest that such an approach to the other references to prophecy and fulfillment is misguided or off target.

So let’s cut to the chase: If Matthew is comparing Jesus and Moses or Israel in the infancy narrative, then is there any sense in which Moses (or Israel) could have been “called a Nazorean”? It is difficult to say, given our uncertainty about precise reference or connotations that term might have had. But there is a possible range of reference to the term in Mandaean texts, namely that of *magician*, which could fit. There is certainly some evidence for the view that Moses was, whether rightly or wrongly, called a magician.¹³ Mandaean priests have historically also provided amulets and bowls and other magical services.¹⁴ What is more, the terms *naṣurai* and *naṣiruta* seem at times to have overtones of skill in these areas. Ethel Drower writes, “In Mandaean manuscripts and legends... the word *Nasurai* is generally used in the sense indicated above, namely, 'one skilled in religious matters and white magic'...

¹³ See for instance Louis H. Feldman, “Josephus’ Portrait of Moses” *JQR* ns. 82:3/4 (1992) 285-328 (here p.323); and more importantly “Josephus’ Portrait of Moses: Part Three” *JQR* ns. 83:3/4 (1993) 301-330 (here p.307) where he writes: “The ancient world was apparently ready to accept Moses as a magician, as we can see, for example, from the statement of Pompeius Trogus (Justin, *Historiae Philippicae* 36, *Epitome* 2.7) in the first century CE, that Joseph had mastered the arts of magic, and that Moses, whom he describes as Joseph’s son, had inherited his father’s knowledge. Later in the first century Pliny the Elder (*Naturalis historia* 30.2,11) mentions that one branch of magic is derived from Moses, Jannes, Lotapes, and the Jews. Likewise, in the second century, when Apuleius (*Apology* 90) enumerates a number of well-known magicians, he speaks of “Moses, whom you know.”” See too Lester L. Grabbe, “The Jannes/Jambres Tradition in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan and Its Date” *JBL* 98:3 (1979) 393-401 (here p.395). See also Gager, John G., “Moses the Magician: Hero of an Ancient Counter-Culture?” *Helios* 21 (1994), 134-161.

¹⁴ In spite of prohibitions against magic in Mandaean sacred texts, the practice was not unknown, as also was clearly the case when it comes to Judaism in the same periods in history. See E. S. Drower, *The Mandaean of Iraq and Iran*, pp. xviii (“Similarly many Mandaean priests, in spite of the *Ginza*’s prohibition of such practices, derive part of their income from the writing of amulets, and from sorcery, when legitimate fees are insufficient for their needs.”), p.3 (on John the Baptist Drower writes, “According to Mandaean teaching, he was a *Nasurai*; that is, an adept in the faith, skilled in the white magic of the priests and concerned largely with the healing of men’s bodies as well as their souls.”

Magic rolls bear the inscription, 'this is written from the nasirutha (i.e. priestly craft) of So-and- So'.¹⁵ Drower also cites an unspecified “orientalist” as proposing as a possible root for nasurai the Syriac root nšr, meaning “to chirp, twitter (as a bird), utter broken sounds (as a magician), to chant, sing praises’.¹⁶ The Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon adds “to murmur” and “to whisper”, both of which clearly could denote practices used by magicians and exorcists in performing incantations. [It may be best to avoid dwelling on “twittering” as a possible meaning, given the connotations that verb has taken on in our time. If I had foreseen how this paper would develop I might have been tempted to give it the title “He shall be called a Twitterer” – which I think we’d all agree would have been a *very bad idea*].¹⁷

If we bring the details of Epiphanius’ reference to *nasaraeans* back into the picture, we find yet further interesting resonances – as well as reasons Matthew might have been concerned to distance Jesus from Nasaraeans of the sort Epiphanius mentions, if they existed and had those characteristics in his time. Epiphanius describes them as descendants of Israel from the region near the Jordan, and as accepting the patriarchs but rejecting the Pentateuch.¹⁸ This is close enough to the outlook of the Mandaeans that it makes sense to posit a connection, even if Epiphanius’ information may not have been complete or precise. But such questions aside, if anything remotely like what Epiphanius describes was connected with the term *nasaraean* in Matthew’s time, then we can understand Matthew’s concern to distance Jesus and his followers from that stance. Matthew’s aim seems to be to present Christianity in a rigorously law-observant fashion.¹⁹

This deals with an objection Donald Hagner raises. He considers it unlikely that Matthew meant Nazorean as a sectarian term, since he is not concerned to present Jesus as primarily an “observant” (another suggested meaning of *našuraiia*, in this case deriving it from nasar, “to guard”).²⁰ Even on this level, one could point out that Jesus in Matthew is far more “observant” than in other early Christian writings: he emphasizes that Jesus did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it, and has him counsel his followers to observe what the scribes and Pharisees demand. Nevertheless, given that Matthew may here be trying to reinterpret the designation “Nasoraean” as having to do with origin in Nazareth, Hagner’s objection is beside the point: Matthew may have been concerned to *combat* an identification of Jesus as part of this movement, but still have had that meaning of the term in mind.

¹⁵ Drower-Macuch pp.255-256. And so “initiates” into esoteric knowledge might be a suitable translation in some instances.

¹⁶ See Eugenio Zolli’s treatment of this, which may have provided the reference in Drower or drawn from the same source as she did.

¹⁷ In addition to the possibility that Matthew had in view accusations that Moses and Jesus were magicians, and saw this as a possible parallel between them, it may also be relevant that Moses was described as having some sort of speech impediment. But since none of the Targums I consulted uses the nšr root in this context, I did not explore this possibility further.

¹⁸ See *Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis: book I* pp.46-47.

¹⁹ See also Anders Runesson, “Rethinking Early Jewish–Christian Relations: Matthean Community History as Pharisaic Intragroup Conflict” *JBL* 127, no. 1 (2008): 95–132.

²⁰ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, p.41.

In the time that remains, let me conclude my paper by turning our attention to matters of methodology in the realm of New Testament intertextuality. What we find, at the end of this brief exploration, is that the situation when we have a clear intertext and when we lack one is not as dissimilar as we might have expected. When we have an intertext, we still often wonder whether the original context matters, and if so how. We ponder the relationship between the texts, and possible issues that might have motivated the quotation of one in the other. We ask whether divergences between the “quotation” and the form of the quoted text in known manuscripts in Hebrew or Greek are the result of an original that differed from the versions we know, or was a result of transformation in the author’s memory, or represents a deliberate recasting. In the case we’ve been considering, Matthew 2:23, we found ourselves asking many of the same questions - for instance, about the author’s source, memory, and/or deliberate recasting. And so it seems that, on the one hand, Matthew 2:23 could legitimately be described as an “exception that proves the rule”, since in most cases we *can* identify an intertext and speak more concretely about *intertextuality*. Yet on the other hand, the fact that so many of the same questions arise even in the absence of a clear intertext suggests that the range of possible relationships between texts, both identified and unidentified, explicit and implicit, are so multifarious and complex that speaking of intertextuality in fact tells us very little in and of itself, and perhaps merely indicates a range of possibilities for exploration and interpretation, rather than offering a means of *clarifying* the meaning of one or more texts. And of course, in all of these instances we need to acknowledge a broader range of intertextual considerations – not merely the interplay between a Gospel and prophetic quotations, but also more subtle allusions to stories, hints at cultural cues, and points of intersection with other literature both earlier and later that might provide clues and/or interesting possibilities for interpretation.

And so let me suggest that this paper, which has left many questions unanswered, hopefully has made one point clear: there is no text without an intertext. And it may already be clear that, in referring in my title to “intertextuality without an intertext” I was being deliberately and mischievously provocative. Those who think that it is possible to conceive of *texts without intertexts* are probably thinking of “intertextuality” as purely a matter of Scriptural quotations – but in its wider use in literary studies, that is not at all what intertextuality envisages. And so we do well to remind ourselves of how many other intertextual connections Matthew’s Gospel has, even in 2:23. For one, Matthew never stands in complete isolation from the other Gospels, in conjunction with which we cannot help but read it, our minds having been filled with other strands of Synoptic tradition. But we also read Matthew *deliberately* with the other Synoptics in mind, as we ask questions about sources. If Matthew used Mark, may we legitimately assume that some, perhaps many, of his readers had encountered Mark’s account as well? If so, might Matthew’s terminology – if not the precise quote in 2:23 – be elucidated by comparison with Mark? Of course, there is no Markan parallel to the Matthean infancy narrative. But the term usually rendered simply as “Nazarene” in Matthew 2:23 is different from the term we usually so translate in Mark. And as we considered the question of what these terms might have meant in the time the Gospels were written, we found ourselves exploring possible intertextual connections between Matthew’s Gospel and a wide range of literary texts and cultural scripts, all of which may deservedly be thought of in terms of “intertextuality.” And so when it comes to Matthew 2:23 many puzzles remain, and the issue of the spurious quotation cannot be said to be resolved. But by bringing intertextuality in

the fullest sense to bear on this matter, we have hopefully at least explored some connections that may elucidate the passage's meaning, if not its reference.