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## Jesus Nazōraios: hidden truths revealed?

Jesus is known to the world as “Jesus of Nazareth”. It is an almost formulaic description of the historical Jesus, and frequently features as the *sine qua non* for such a character. Even the minimalist identikit for a real Jesus, which strip out the supernatural events and the Old Testament copy, leave behind a bare-bones historical ‘Jesus’ who carries this plain heading on his ‘wanted’ poster: “Jesus of Nazareth”. Jesus, the minimalist theory goes, may not have been a divine miracle-worker, but he was from Nazareth, preached, and was crucified by Pilate. Such a process is based on the same flawed premise as reconstructions of the *Testimonium Flavianum* obtained by subtracting the most implausible elements. However, the inclusion of the Nazarene element in the gospels – like so many ‘historical’ aspects missing from the Pauline epistles - raises more fundamental issues which throw some dim light on the mythologizing and historicising processes of early Christianity.

Every reference in the gospels to “Jesus of Nazareth” – including the gospel equivalent of our ‘wanted’ poster, Pilate’s iconic inscription above the cross (John 19:9) – says something quite different: Ἰησοῦς ὁ Ναζωραῖος - ‘Jesus the Nazōraios’, or Ἰησοῦς ὁ Ναζαρηνός - ‘Jesus the Nazarēnos’. Does this phrase really just mean ‘Jesus of Nazareth’? Or does it have a distinctive religious significance that was originally tied to a mystical idea rather than a place?

Ehrman favours the historicity of anything in the gospels that early Christians had no obvious reason to make up – and to him the idea that Jesus came from an insignificant town such as Nazareth is not a detail that would advance Christian vested interests (Ehrman, Disk 6, 11-3). According to Ehrman such

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details survive in our tradition because they were real. The so-called Criterion of Embarrassment, also known in more philosophical language as the criterion of contradiction (Meyer 2002) or more portentously as the “movement against the redactional tendency” (Porter 2000, p.162) is particularly popular with historicists. Meier (2001, p.168) suggests that “embarrassing material coming from Jesus would naturally be either suppressed or softened in later stages of the Gospel tradition”. However, neither the embarrassment felt, nor the compulsion to include such “embarrassing” details, has been satisfactorily explained. The results of applying the criterion are hardly convincing: details considered ‘authentic’ due to embarrassment include supernatural events such as the cursing of the fig-tree (Barnett 2009, p.223). And in terms of embarrassment, it is hard to top the accounts in the infancy gospel of Thomas (which Ehrman dates as early as 125CE) of the child Jesus petulantly killing children for petty slights: it is clear from the reaction of the other townspeople that the embarrassment factor spans the ages – and by the logic of this criterion, these episodes would be particularly authentic. Given the extraordinary deeds and events reported in the gospels, the proposition that anyone living at the time of writing would have called the writers to account for things that they knew to be untrue or that they had omitted, seems implausible. It can be said that Jesus fed 5000, turned water into wine, walked on water, resurrected the dead, and so on – yet somebody would be sure to pull the evangelist up if they left out a few details? If compulsion applied, it would be to church leaders in relation to the feasibility of significantly altering texts which were widely circulated - not to the gospel authors, for whom any hidden agenda of embarrassment can only be speculation.

Nazareth is one such detail commonly allowed as ‘historical’ under the Criterion of Embarrassment. Ehrman maintains that Nazareth is a feature which is both random and embarrassing, and that it must thereby be real. Christians, Ehrman says, would have had him come from somewhere like

Bethlehem to fulfil a prophecy and "wouldn't have made up the idea that he came from a little one horse town like Nazareth" (Ehrman, Disk 6, 11-3). However, Ehrman ignores the fact that Jesus **was** said to come from Nazareth precisely so that a prophecy might be fulfilled. Matthew explicitly frames Jesus' coming from Nazareth in these terms: Joseph, having been warned in a dream about returning to Judea, decides to go to Galilee instead, and makes his home in a city called Nazareth, "ὅπως πληρωθῆ τὸ ῥηθὲν διὰ τῶν προφητῶν ὅτι Ναζωραῖος κληθήσεται" – "so that it might be fulfilled what was spoken through the prophets, that a Nazōraion he shall be called" (Matthew 2:23). Ναζωραῖος is almost universally translated here as 'a Nazarene' – but when used elsewhere in conjunction with Jesus, as "Jesus of Nazareth". Matthew 2:23 raises two connected questions: what does Nazōraion mean, and what is the prophecy? These questions stand regardless of whether or not the phrase is an interpolation - and Scaliger, cited in Jonge (1996, p.182) believed that it was, and an inept one at that ("additiones sunt veterum christainorum ineptae" – though neither Scaliger nor Jonge indicate why it would have been interpolated, and the devout Scaliger deemed it interpolated only because of its foolishness).

The prophecy can potentially inform the meaning of Nazōraion, but may just as well raise further questions concerning its fulfilment. Given that there is no Old Testament reference to a city or town called Nazareth, it seems that the embarrassment may well lie in the quality of a prophecy that depends on word-play. Kittel et al (1985, p.625) insist that the term derives from "the city of Nazareth as the hometown of Jesus" and that there is no obstacle to such a proposition. On the face of it, however, the word Nazōraion does not and cannot mean 'of Nazareth': it is not the natural word to describe a citizen of a place variously named as Nazara, Nazaret and Nazareth. If we take Nazareth as the most common spelling of the place-name (5 times in the gospels, against four for Nazaret and two for Nazara), a Nazarene would have been a Nazarethnon (Ναζαρέθνός), Nazarethenon (Ναζαρέθένός), Nazarethaion

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(Ναζαρέθαιός), or possibly (based on the word at Mark 1:5 and John 7:25 for people of Jerusalem) Nazarethiton (Ναζαρέθιτός) – but certainly not a Nazōraion or a Nazarēnon.

Yet the most natural way to refer to Jesus being from Nazareth would simply be to say what the translations insist on saying: Jesus of, or from, Nazareth. When Acts refers to Paul being a native of Tarsus, it is as Saulon Tarsea (Acts 9:11 Σαῦλον ... Ταρσέα). The title Nazōraios (and its variant Nazarēnos) is mentioned much more frequently than Nazareth. Jesus is repeatedly called 'the Nazōraion' and 'the Nazarēnon' (ὁ Ναζωραῖος and ὁ Ναζαρηνός), where people like Paul are simply described as being from Tarsus (at least when he's not also being described as a Nazōraion). While there are frequent references in translations to “Jesus of Nazareth”, they are all essentially mistranslations of ὁ Ναζωραῖος and ὁ Ναζαρηνός. On only one occasion in the gospels is Jesus identified (by the people of Jerusalem) as “Jesus the prophet from Nazareth” (Matthew 21:11 Ἰησοῦς ὁ ἀπὸ Ναζαρέθ) – a more elaborate rendition. Mark 1:9 refers to Jesus physically travelling from Nazaret: Ἰησοῦς ἀπὸ Ναζαρέτ.... – and John refers to Joseph as being ἀπὸ Ναζαρέτ.

The Ναζωραῖος ‘prophecy’ has been most frequently linked to Isaiah 11:1, and the prophecy that “there shall come forth a shoot out of the stock of Jesse, and a branch out of his roots shall bear fruit”. This quotation is usually followed by an explanation that the Hebrew for 'branch' is netser, and this either “sounds something like Nazareth” (Gundry 2003, p.171) **or** was transliterated into 'Nazōraios' (Presutta 2007, p.262) (Cook 2009, p.143). However, while the Hebrew is indeed ve·ne·tzer, Matthew (as will become clear) relied on the Septuagint translation. The word used in Isaiah 11:1 is ῥίζης (καὶ ἐξελεύσεται ῥάβδος ἐκ τῆς ῥίζης Ἰεσαι καὶ ἄνθος ἐκ τῆς ῥίζης ἀναβήσεται). The same word is used a lot in the New Testament (e.g. “I am the root and offspring of David”, Revelation 22:16). However, it is not netser,

and does not in any way resemble netser, natsar, nazir or nazar. When Paul (Romans 15:12) refers to Isaiah's prophecy that "there will be the root of Jesse, he who arises to rule over the Gentiles; in him the Gentiles will hope", he is referring to Isaiah 11:10, and also uses the word **ρίζα**. The Greek word used at 11:10 in the Septuagint is ἄνθος (which actually, like the Vulgate's *flos* for Is.11:1, means flower). The Hebrew is again ve·ne·tzer. Neither of these words - ρίζα or ἄνθος - translate or transliterate to Nazōraion. Gundry (2003) also cites Zechariah 6:12 (man whose name is Branch) as a point of reference for Matthew's prophecy, Almonz indicating that the Hebrew word here is *netser* (2003, p.104). Racy (2007, p.79) also cites Zechariah 6:12 and states categorically that Nazarene is derived from *netser*. However, the Hebrew word at Zechariah 6:12 is not *netser*: neither the Hebrew *tsemach* nor the LXX *anatolē* remotely resembles Nazōraion. Tsemach was apparently a proper name etymologically associated with growth out of the ground. It is always difficult to render this sort of double meaning in translation, and the LXX translators settled on ἀνατολή as a proper name which also contains a sense of 'rising'.

In addition, both netser (branch) and natsar (watch) use a backed s. Anyone who understood Hebrew or Aramaic would not confuse a zayin with a tsade, and would not transcribe it from the original as a zeta.

The match between Matthew 2:23 - ὅτι ναζωραῖος – and Judges 13:7 - ὅτι ναζιραῖον in the Septuagint – is much stronger than any speculative link with similar sounding Hebrew words. Thiede (2003, p.432) discounts Judges 13:5 on the grounds that it is not a messianic prophecy and refers to a 'Nazorite', "something Jesus never was". However, the verbal similarity is compelling, with a single vowel difference – Judges' iota changed by Matthew to an omega.

When the unclean spirit at Mark 1:24 and Luke 4:34 addresses Jesus as Ἰησοῦ Ναζαρηνέ, it has no obvious reason to refer to his town of origin, but rather as a spirit (πνεῦμα), shows its special spiritual knowledge of who he is spiritually, a sense which segues into and is structurally mirrored by the phrase ὁ ἅγιος τοῦ θεοῦ (the holy one of God): Judges 13:5 refers to Samson as set apart to God - ναζιραῖον ἔσται τῷ θεῷ (13:7) and to ὅτι ναζιραῖον θεοῦ, of whom it is prophesied that he will deliver Israel. The phraseology used to describe the nazirite Samuel is also echoed in the gospels: the child Samuel grows in stature and favour with the Lord and with men (1 Samuel 2:26 - μετὰ κυρίου καὶ μετὰ ἀνθρώπων), while the boy Jesus also grows in stature and in favour with God and man (Luke 2:52 - παρὰ θεῶ καὶ ἀνθρώποις). While Jesus did take an oath of abstinence at Mark 14:25 and Matthew 26:29, this was subsequent to his being known as a Nazōraion. Although he could conceivably have ended an offstage Nazirite oath with his baptism, Matthew may be merely playing with words in relation to Nazōraion and Nazareth. He is not explicitly saying that Jesus was a Nazirite, and is not necessarily implying it as a literal proposition.

### **Philo and the ultimate nazirite**

Yet the concept of a nazirite Jesus could have a significance at a symbolic and mystical level: 'nazirite' is associated with sacrifice (including soterial and sin sacrifice), and in particular with self-sacrifice. In Numbers the nazirite vow (a 'great vow' - μεγάλης .. εὐχὴν) as given to Moses is outlined: setting oneself aside to the Lord, abstaining from drink or anything from the vine, keep oneself separate from dead bodies, and not cutting one's hair (6:2-9). The offerings required if the vow is breached are also detailed (6:9-12). However, Philo's explanation of the Great Vow presents some interesting nuances. He elaborates on what is so great about the vow: it is called the **μεγάλη** εὐχή he says (Philo 1937, p.247), because those making the vow



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actually consecrate **themselves**. The nazirite's own body is prepared as if it were an offering: he surrenders not only his first-fruits, but also his own self (και ἑαυτου παραχωρειν). To release him from his vow the votary must bring to sacrifice, as well as a he-lamb for a whole burnt offering (όλοκαυτώ), a ewe-lamb as a sin-offering (περι ἁμαρτίας - peri hamartias) and a ram as a salvation or preservation offering (θυσίαν τοῦ σωτηρίου - thusian tou sotēriou). Both the sin (hamartia) and preservation (sotērios) sacrifices are of course explicitly fundamental to the Christian narrative of Jesus. All three, Philo tells us, find their likeness in the maker of the vow: the he-lamb *holocausto* symbolizes the fact that he brings his very self to the sacrifice; the she-lamb sin-offering is made because he is a man; and the *sotērios* (safety, deliverance), because he acknowledges the real saviour, God (rather than human physicians).

Christian theology shifts the soterial emphasis from preservation in this life to eternal salvation from death – and, consequently, the level of the nazirite sacrifice. The reshaping of nazirite would be similar to the upscaling of other Jewish concepts, such as 'son of God'. Philo elaborates (254) that the votary has vowed to bring himself, so it was necessary that some part of the votary's self (τι των του ευξαμενου μεροσ) should be sacrificially offered. As it would be sacrilege that the altar should be defiled by human blood, this is to be his hair. While Philo as a Jew is careful to remind the reader that an actual blood-sacrifice would be unlawful, it is in the context of describing the ritual preparation of the nazirite's own self for sacrifice, of bringing himself to the sacrifice and offering a lawful part of his person. Jesus Nazōraios brings himself 'whole' as a sin and soterial sacrifice.

### **The Special One**

It may be that Matthew and his sources had in mind the nazirite's preparation for this whole, sin and salvation sacrifice of the self when connecting Jesus philologically to them; and that the reference to prophecy in this respect is of deep significance. The narrative of the gospels is built around the preparation of Jesus for ritual sacrifice, and this quality is fundamental to his character and to the whole Christian enterprise. Jesus' sacrifice was also a sin offering: the same phrase as in Philo, *περὶ ἁμαρτίας*, is used at Hebrews 10:18 to describe the sacrifice that is no longer needed because of the blood of Jesus (*ἐν τῷ αἵματι Ἰησοῦ*), which washes away our sins (Revelation 1:5). John the Baptist (John 1:29) hails him as the lamb of God (*ὁ ἄμνος τοῦ θεοῦ*) who takes away the sins of the world (*τὴν ἁμαρτίαν τοῦ κόσμου*). Like the nazirite's sacrificial lamb described in Numbers 6:14 he is an *ἄμωμον* (unblemished) lamb (Peter 1:19, Hebrews 9:14). His sacrifice (*θυσία*) to God is repeatedly referred to, as is his designation as the Saviour (*σωτήρ*).

Whatever the connection with the nazirite's self-sacrifice, Jesus is frequently referred to in the canonical gospels as *ὁ Ναζωραῖος* or *ὁ Ναζαρηνός* in circumstances of particular spiritual significance and quintessential identity: Peter's denial when Jesus is brought away for sacrifice (*Ναζωραῖος* - Matthew 26:71; *Ναζαρηνός* - Mark 14:67); on the inscription at the foot of the cross at the point of sacrifice (*Ναζωραῖος* - John 19:19); and, finally, after the salvific resurrection (*Ναζωραῖος* - John 18:5 and 18:7; *Ναζαρηνός* - Luke 24:19). The designation is a significant phrase cryptically plucked out from the Old Testament as a key theme, in the same way as the 'Son of Man' designation was plucked out of Daniel (7:13, 8:17) and Ezekiel. As we have seen, demonic spirits recognize him as *Ναζωραῖος* - and as the Holy One of God (Luke 4:34) and Son of God (Matthew 8:29, Mark 3:10, Luke 4:41). A blind man also recognises him as *Ναζαρηνός* (Mark 10:47) - a man unusually named, as Bartimeus (Bar-Timeus, perhaps after Plato's *Τίμαιος*), he fits the seer archetype who traditionally has lost his eyes but gained supernatural insight into the truth.

Given Matthew 2:23, and its resonance with Judges 13:7, it seems likely that Matthew conceives of a mystical connection with the nazirite, however unrealistic it might be in a literalistic sense. Matthew's treatment of prophecy is hardly rigorous. For example, he misreads one other prophecy in a manner that is vividly illustrated: in reading Zechariah 9:9 he mistakes "a colt, even the foal of an ass" as two animals, apparently misreading καὶ as a literal 'and' rather than an emphatic 'even', in ἐπὶ ὑποζύγιον καὶ πῶλον νέον. Matthew consequently has Jesus absurdly riding two animals into Jerusalem [21:2ff]. In the same manner he (or an earlier writer) may have misread Judges, mechanistically copying a prophecy concerning one who would deliver Israel. A confusion of ὅτι ναζωραῖος and ὅτι ναζιραῖον is hardly less foolish than having Jesus ride two animals into Jerusalem. Once the Nazōraion moniker was established, meaning perhaps holy one set aside for God as a sacrifice, the drive to historicise Jesus may have translated the designation into a place of origin. This would be no less crude a process than taking an actual town of origin and finding a suitable word-play in the Old Testament – but it would surely be easier to derive or find a similar-sounding town name from prophetic words than it would be to find similar-sounding words of prophecy based on a given place name. It seems clear that Nazōraion/Nazarēnos is first and foremost a title of spiritual significance – and that Jesus is eponymously referred to as Jesus the Nazōraion in a manner analogous to 'Jesus the Christ'.

### **The Gospel of Philip**

The Nag Hammadi manuscript of the Gospel of Philip is a Coptic translation from Greek, but preserves this specific Greek title Nazōraion. Significantly, it alternates between both the Ναζωραῖος and Ναζαρηνός spellings and treats them as synonymous regardless of specific spelling: Ναζωραῖος is used in

conjunction with the Aramaic title messiah, while Ναζαρηνός is used otherwise. Even more significantly, it explicitly purports to explain the linguistic meaning of the title. At verse 20a (or 19 in some editions) the meaning of Jesus and Christ are explained: Jesus is a secret name, the Christ a revealed name. Jesus is the same in all languages, but other languages have other words for Christ. Then we are suddenly told (20b): “The revealed Nazarēnon is the secret!” or “The Nazarēnon reveals what is hidden” Os (2007, p.198) has “the Nazarene is the revealed of the hidden one” in this verse. MacRae and Wilson (1988) translate this as “‘The Nazarene’ is the one who reveals secret things”; Isenberg (1968, p.134) and Jacobs (2006) as “‘The Nazarene’ is he who reveals what is hidden”. The Ecumenical Coptic Project (2009) has “The revealed Nazarene is the secret!” Nazarēnos here is translated as nazirite by the Ecumenical Coptic Project (with footnotes referencing Numbers 6).

Sandwiched between ‘Jesus’ and ‘Christ’, Ναζωραῖος is clearly considered by the Gospel of Philip author to be a titular designation in the same manner as Christ. At verse 51 the formula is repeated twice: the Apostles who preceded the author called him “Yeshua the Nazōraion messiah”, which is to say Yeshua the Nazōraion Christ”. We are told again that the last name is the Christ, the first is Yeshua, that in the middle is the Nazarēnos. ‘Messiah’, it is explained, has two references: both the anointed and also the measured. ‘Yeshua’ in Hebrew is the atonement. “‘Ναζαρα’ is the truth” (αληθεια), therefore the Ναζαρηνός is the αληθεια.” Van Os translates aletheia as “[the one from] the Truth” (2007, p.54), and suggests that Nazarēnos designates ‘the hidden truth of God’. “The Christ”, the text continues, “is the measured, the Ναζαρηνός with Yeshua are the measurement”.

The author of ‘Philip’ therefore explains the meaning of both Ναζωραῖος and Ναζαρηνός with reference to ‘Nazara’, the spelling for Jesus’ city of origin at

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Matthew 4:13 and Luke 4:16. However, ‘Philip’ does not indicate that *Ναζαρά* is a place-name – simply that it means the truth. It is not immediately obvious how or why it means the truth. There is no obvious linguistic basis for such a meaning, but while one might reasonably conclude that the authors of this gospel (and perhaps of the synoptic gospels) had only a restricted grasp of Hebrew and Aramaic, it seems clear that the word was ‘understood’ to mean it in some sense. Irenaeus (*Ante-Nicene Fathers – Against Heresies* Vol. I 21:3) refers to a Valentinian formula which invokes Christ’s name “*Ἰησοῦ Ναζαριᾶ*”, which Irenaeus translates as “O Saviour of Truth”. This spelling with an iota differs again from the three variants in the gospels – and it is, as with Nazara in Philip, presented as a title in the manner of *Ναζαρηνός* and *Ναζωραῖος*. Irenaeus also comments on the deliberate use of “Hebrew words in order to inspire greater awe into the Gallic neophyte” (Roberts, A. & Donaldson, J. 1868, p.82) (King 1864, p.96). He is not specific as to whether *Ναζαριᾶ* is one of those words, but it is clear that esoteric words played a powerful role in ancient ritual.

### **Mandaean Nasirutha**

The reference in Philip is specifically an explanation of the etymology of the term. Layton (1995, p.235) and Schenke (cited in Kirby, 2006) both see the gospel as Valentinian, with Schenke arguing that it was composed in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. And it seems clear that the composition draws on earlier sources, leaving open the possibility that it draws on pre-Christian Gnostic tradition. The two connected meanings presented in Philip – “revealer of the hidden” and “truth” – appear to find an echo in Mandaeanism. In Mandaean Aramaic, the word ‘Nasurai’ is used to mean “one skilled in religious matters and white magic” (E. S. Drower & Buckley 2002, p.4). Drower and Buckley also connect the term with the Arabic for Christian (Nasara), and allude to Jesus’ identification in the Talmud as *Nusri*.

Ménard (1988, p.139) indicates that the word is also used in this sense in Mandaean Aramaic, and is analogous to a Hebrew verbal form which can mean ‘to hide’ or ‘to keep secret’. Van Os (2007, p.199) indicates that in Hebrew, this verbal form can mean ‘to hide’ or ‘to keep secret’; and that Mandaeans were initiated into the hidden or secret things of the truth. The word denoting the Mandaean initiate - *nasuraia* – and the word denoting the secret knowledge – *nasirutha* - may be a neologism derived from a n-s word and *aletheia* (truth). As such, the n-s part of the word would indicate something like revealer, and the “eth” ending the ‘truth’ – an interpretation that would accord with that presented in the Gospel of Philip. Ignatius, writing probably in the first century, describes Jesus the High Priest as he who ‘alone is entrusted with the secret things of God, the door of the Father’ (Behr 2001, p.87) . Os (2007, p.197) suggests that “the etymology travelled through the hands of people who did not have a full command of Hebrew and Aramaic”, and that the link between the Mandaean *nasuraia* and *nasirutha* and the Nazarēnos title had already been made at the time of Ignatius’ writing. Lidzbarski (2009) concludes that Jesus was placed in Nazareth to explain a tradition that he was a Nasurai.

Drower’s translation of the *Ginza Rba* (a fragmentary work which is hard to date) refers repeatedly to “Nasoraean”. One verse also has echoes of the ‘christ’ designation: ‘The worlds glisten (with costly) oil, but Nasoraean shine with the radiance of Life’ (L. E. S. Drower 1959).

### **Carpenters’ Guild**

Smith (1912, p.751) suggests a different etymology, from the Aramaic *nesar*, meaning "to saw," with the cognate participle or noun meaning "carpenter". Price (2003, p.106) cites Eisler (1931, p.235) as connecting John with the

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Mandaeans and suggests that the gnostic pre-Christian Nasorean sect “comprised itinerant carpenters”.

### ***City of Nazareth...Nazara, Nazaret***

It seems clear that the origin of Ναζωραίων has nothing to do with citizenship of a city called Nazareth. We can see in Acts that the early Christians were known, not as Christians, but by that other title: Ναζωραίων (Acts 24:5). Clearly there was no suggestion that they were all citizens of a town called Nazareth.

Additionally, the hypothesis that Nazareth was derived from the spiritual title Nazōraion is supported not only by the incoherent etymological relationship between that title and Nazareth, but also by the fact that several different words are used to denote Nazareth itself. Nazara would have been preferred, certainly in terms of the designation *Nazarēnos*, but there was no town of that name even at the time of writing.

Holding (2008) has proposed that the spelling of Nazareth varies depending on whether the next word begins with a “a vowel or rough breathing”:  
Nazaret occurs when the theta of Nazareth elides to a tau before an aspirated vowel (Matthew 2:23); Nazara occurs before an unaspirated vowel (Matthew 4:13 - the ‘eth’ changing to an alpha); and the theta is retained before a consonant. The spelling before an unaspirated vowel is indeed Nazara on both of the occasions that an aspirated vowel occurs after the place-name in the New Testament. Though normally the hiatus formed where an important word ends with a vowel and is followed by another beginning with a vowel, is where we would expect elision to occur. If the place-name were Nazareta, one would expect elision to theta in front of an aspirated vowel and elision of the a in front of an unaspirated vowel. Moreover, Nazareth appears before a ‘simple vowel’ at Luke 2:4; and while Nazaret precedes an aspirated omicron

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in the prophetic Matthew 2:23, in every single one of the other three occurrences of Nazaret precedes a consonant, not an aspirated vowel. And in Acts 10:38 the theta ending is used before an aspirated omega: Ναζαρέθ ὤς. At Luke 2:4 the theta ending precedes, not a consonant, but the ‘simple’ unaspirated vowel that should mean Nazara: Ναζαρέθ εἰς.

## **Jerusalem**

Holding also cites the different spellings of Jerusalem as analogous to those of Nazareth. However, it seems clear that Jerusalem is, unusually, declined, as Ἱεροσόλυμα occurs exclusively in the nominative and accusative (on 10 occasions following the preposition εἰς), Ἱεροσολύμων in the genitive, and Ἱεροσολύμοις in the dative (there is no such pattern with Nazareth).

Generally it follows the form of a second declension plural neuter noun: the only possible exception is Matthew 2:3, where the adjectival agreement seems to function as a collective (all, every) singular - πᾶσα (rather than πάντες) Ἱεροσόλυμα. When an adjective is formed from Jerusalem at John 7:25, it takes the form τῶν Ἱεροσολυμιτῶν.

Holding's explanation of the spelling variations does not therefore appear to be sound. Additionally, one would not expect the place-name to be declinable, and indeed all three spellings are used at some point in the same case, the accusative, while NazareT and NazareTH are both used in the genitive (and before consonants).

## **Magadan/Magdala/Magdalene**

Mary Magdalene is referred to 11 times as ‘the Magdalēnē’ (Μαρία Μαγδαληνή) and once (Luke 8:2) as ‘called Magdalēnē’ (Μαρία καλουμένη Μαγδαληνή). This is usually translated as Mary Magdalene rather than Mary from Magdala – so while the designation is analogous to Jesus the Nazōraion/Nazarēnos, it is



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translated very differently (and more accurately). While Magdala was a town on the shore of Galilee, the town referred to at Matthew 15:39 is called Μαγαδάν (Magadan) in the Westcott/Hort and Tischendorf 8<sup>th</sup> – both of which revised the *textus receptus* based on evidence from the earliest manuscripts and are thence more reliable than those which have Μαγδαλά. Whether or not Magdala (a place-name which, unlike any variation of Nazareth, could be found in the Talmud) was inserted later because Μαγδαληνή is derivable from it (and Magadan itself appears to have supplanted the Δαλμανουθά – Dalmanoutha where Mark 8:10 located the same episode), Magdala/Magadan is another example of general pliability of the gospel narratives and specifically of a place-name changing to match an established descriptor. The connection between place and descriptor is of course not essential or even made explicit in the gospels, in the way that Nazōraion/Nazaret is.

### **Gadara/Gadarene/Gerasa**

Γαδαρηνῶν (Gadarēnōn) has a similar form to Ναζαρηνός, and occurs just the once. However, not all the texts agree even on this one occurrence, with many giving Γεργεσηνῶν, the word that is generally accepted as appearing at Mark 5:1, Luke 8:26, and Luke 8:37 (though some texts – and most translations – have Γαδαρηνῶν. And at Luke 8:26 Westcott/Hort has Γερασηνῶν, while Tischendorf (8th Ed) has Γεργεσηνῶν. The Codex Sinaiticus has γερασηνῶ at Mark 5:1 and γαζαρηνων at Matthew 8:28: it seems most likely that γερασηνῶ is original to Mark and earlier, and was later altered when it was realised that Gerasa was some 40 miles distant from the Sea of Galilee rather than on the other side of it. Given the existence of a place called Gadara, this suggests the probability of a legitimate match between two of the city/adjective combinations for Nazareth: Nazara and

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Nazarēnos. However, this cannot account for either Nazōraion or for the variations in the spelling of the placename.

### ***Conclusion***

The morphing of the spiritual title Nazōraion – which attached to the figure of Jesus either after or in competition with Paul’s religion – into the city of Nazareth, provides strong forensic clues to a wider process of historicising something that had previously been exclusively spiritual. The drive to historicise required a place-name for Jesus’ physical point of origin. Nazareth was not chosen – over, say, Bethlehem – because it was an obscure place and thereby less vulnerable to adverse testimony. It is likely to have been chosen because some early Christians attached mystical significance to the titles ὁ Ναζωραῖος and ὁ Ναζαρηνός and thought that in historicising Jesus they could be connected to the placename Nazareth, blurring the distinction between a linguistically more plausible but non-existent Nazara. As is the nature of mystical language, the Ναζωραῖος title was perhaps not clearly understood even then, but seems to have signified a holy one of God, a revealer of His hidden truth and/or a neo-nazirite preparing himself for the ultimate soterial sacrifice. As such the geographical transformation of the Ναζωραῖος can symbolise the larger enterprise of extricating a messianic being from his hiding-place in scripture and placing him in the real world. The derivation of place name from title was felt to be plausible, and is indicative of a drive to historicise which was undertaken to support the doctrine of bodily resurrection. This is not a doctrine shared by Paul, who of course makes no mention either of the title or the place. The Nazōraion may remain the mystery that it was held to be, but it seems that as a gospel ingredient it may have been pivotal in the transition of Jesus from the mystical to the historical.

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