

NAZARENE

A number of theologians, through the misunderstanding of Acts 24:5, hold to the belief that the early Christians were referred to as "Nazarenes", however, there is no solid evidence whatsoever for that belief. The basis for the error stems from the wording of Acts 24:5 which reads as follows: **"For we found this man a pestilent fellow, and a mover of sedition among all the Jews throughout the world, and a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes"**. It is understandable why some theologians mistakenly believe the early followers of Christ were called Nazarenes when we read the preceding verse from the book of Acts.

As we begin to look into the truth of the matter, let us turn to the Bible to examine what references are made of Jesus as being a resident of a specific town. In Matthew 2:23, we read: **"And he came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, He shall be called a Nazarene"**. In this verse, Jesus is referred to as a Nazarene and this is entirely logical because it was the place of his residence and he spent most of his life in Nazareth, fulfilling the prophecy that he shall be called a Nazarene. Matthew 26:71 reads: **"And when he was gone out into the porch, another maid saw him, and said unto them that were there, This fellow was also with Jesus of Nazareth"**. The preceding two verses from Matthew that refer to Jesus as a Nazarene are denoting where he resided, and I think we need not make any further comments about this because the verses were clearly referring to Jesus as an inhabitant of that town, and nothing more.

Returning to Acts 24:5, the term "Nazarene" is applied specifically to the followers of Jesus in the course of mockery and contempt, because it was a customary habit of Jews to apply this term to show their contempt for those adherents of the Galilean Messiah. It was the misunderstanding of this text by theologians and some early church writers that the name of the Nazarenes was believed to represent the early Christian church. In fact, there is no authoritative proof that those first Christians ever bore this name except when being mocked by others.

The converted Jews and Gentiles were first called Christians at Antioch – see Acts 11:26. Under the teachings of Paul, both converted Jews and Gentiles accepted and believed Jesus was the Messiah. It is not conceivable that the Pharisees, the Sadducees or any other of the Jewish sects would have referred to the followers of Jesus as "Christian" given the word means "believer and follower of the "Messiah" (note that "Christ" is Greek for "Anointed One", in other words, "Messiah"). Therefore, the Jews sought to apply a phrase with an expression of ridicule and contempt. To this end, there was a proverb among them that "nothing good could come from Nazareth". Thus, it is understandable why the Jews would call them the "sect of the Nazarenes". John 1:46a: **"And Nathanael said unto him, Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth?"** As mentioned, the word "Christ" means Messiah, thus, the Jews would never make mockery and derision of such a word since it was the Jews' hope that a Messiah would come and free them as a people. Hence, it is not likely the Jews would apply the term "Christian" to his followers when they believed Jesus to be a false Messiah. As for the Gentile heathen, they might slander the name Christ (Messiah), as it did not hold any special significance to them.

It should be explained that there was a Jewish-Christian sect that is believed to have formed after the dispersion of the Jews in 70 and 135 A.D., resulting from Titus and the edict of Emperor Hadrian. Within this sect, there were differences of doctrinal beliefs among them. These people, who were called "Ebionites", were divided on the laws of Moses, some believing they should be observed, others believing a new covenant could not embrace the old. Concerning Jesus, the majority believed Jesus to be the long awaited Messiah, the Holy One of God, that he descended from the seed of David, Joseph being his natural father.

These Ebionites, after the dispersion, settled mainly in the eastern area of the Dead Sea and Jordan River, a few in the area of the West Bank and some into the countries of Syria and Mesopotamia. In the fourth century and beyond, a Christian sect was found in this latter area that was referred to as "Nazarenes". Their beliefs were very similar to the earlier Ebionites and it is believed they were the offshoot of this sect.

Muhammad, the religious leader of Islam, when in his youth was a camel driver of caravans. The caravans took him on long trips where Muhammad came into contact with Judeans, Zoroastrians and Christians. He absorbed the teachings of the different religions through oral conversations. He, no doubt, had come into contact with the Nazarean Christians, whose doctrine, since the time of the Ebionites, had been influenced to a certain degree by the new faith of Catholicism. The name Nazarene still exists in the Arabic language as the ordinary designation for Christians, probably because it was the Nazarean Christian sect that Muhammad had more frequent contact with during his journeys, and also the reason why some of the characteristics tenets appear in the religion of Muhammedanism come from the Nazarean sect.

The sect of the Ebionites appeared in later times in two factions. To one group, Jesus was a prophet, and the son of Joseph. Later, the Ebionites (Nazarene faction) had points of controversy as to whether Jesus was a son of Joseph or miraculously conceived by the Holy Ghost by a virgin birth, a doctrine which became wide-spread in the Alexandrian and Roman church very early. The majority of the original Ebionites in the Jordan area still maintained Jesus was one of the sons of Joseph. There were in Asia Minor and scattered throughout the Middle East those who followed the teachings of the twelve, who continued to follow in the faith and in the name designated for them at Antioch in approximately 41 A.D.

Based on this information, we can be confident that there was NO sect known as the Nazarenes in the primitive church of the first century. And as previously stated, when this name was used during that early period, it was used in reference towards the Christians as a term of ridicule.

From Acts 24:5, knowing the Pharisees, Sadducees and other Jewish sects were hostile against the followers of Christ in those early years of the church, there is no reason to assume Paul belonged to a sect that was called the Nazarenes. Paul never said that we were to call ourselves Nazarenes, nor did any other apostle imply this at any time in the scriptures. It was Tertullus (read Acts 24) who used this name to apply to Christians like Paul, and this he did because of the great contempt he had for the followers of Christ. Tertullus was an orator who had been retained by the Jews to present their case against Paul before the Roman Procurator, Felix.

So if the followers of Christ were not known as Nazarenes in the first century A.D., what were they called? From reading Acts 11:26, we acquire from it the designated scriptural name of Christ's disciples: ***"And when he had found him, he brought him unto Antioch, And it came to pass, that a whole year they assembled themselves with the church, and taught much people. And the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch."*** From this text we are told that the disciples were named after the Anointed, by calling themselves by the name of "Christian" which is derived from Christ. Their life style was to be one of cordial obedience to the teaching and examples of the Messiah.

This event at Antioch took place about the year 41 A.D. and the name "Christian" had been designated to distinguish them from other sects (probably those disciples who had fallen away). The name given was just "Christian" with no hyphenated names preceding it. The "Ebionites" made their appearance at the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus, shortly after 70 A.D., and the "Nazarenes" appear even at a much later date.

To summarize our discussion to this point, it was the belief that the early Christians, or disciples, had been referred to as the "sect of the Nazarenes" because of the appearance of that name in Acts 24:5. As described previously, it was being used in mockery and scorn by Tertullus towards the apostle Paul. Now, we will present the evidence to substantiate our stand concerning the name of Nazarene.

Recall from the scriptures that the disciples were first called "Christians" (Acts 11:46) in the year 41 A.D., and that the remarks that Tertullus had made in Acts 24:5, were in fact nineteen years later (60 A.D.).

We know that the disciples of Christ had been called Christians at various times since Antioch by the biblical phrasing of ***"were called Christians first in Antioch"***. So why now were they referred to by Tertullus as the sect of the Nazarenes? It was simply a derogatory remark and one well known, by many scholarly theologians. Further evidence is given to us by scripture in the continued usage of the designation of "Christian" when we read from Acts 26:28, 29: ***"Then Agrippa said unto Paul, Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian. And Paul said, I would to God, that not only thou, but also all that hear me this day, were both almost, and altogether such as I am, except these bonds."***

Subsequent to the time that Tertullus had called Paul a Nazarene in scorn, Agrippa indicates by his answer to Paul his knowledge that the name of "Christian" was commonly used for the disciples of Jesus. Take note that this event took place in 62 A.D., twenty one (21) years since the Christians had received their name at Antioch, two (2) years after the time of Paul's confrontation with Tertullus. Notice Paul's answer to Agrippa in his reply to Agrippa's statement of almost being persuaded to be a Christian: ***"I would to God, that not only you, but also all that hear me this day, were both almost and altogether such as I am."*** It was two years earlier Paul had been referred to as a Nazarene by Tertullus. Yet Paul openly acknowledges himself as being called a Christian two years later when standing before Agrippa.

Peter writes in his epistle in 1 Peter 4:16 and confirms the designated name of the followers of Jesus: ***"Yet if any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glory God on this behalf."*** Should we still have any doubt as to what title those early adherents of Jesus were called? Were they called Baptist? Catholic? Lutheran? Nazarenes? No! They were called by none of these titles. They were simply called Christians, without any adjective, and as it reads in 1 Peter, they needed not be ashamed and should glorify God in being a bearer of Jesus' name, Christian. "Christian" is the name of the true disciples of Jesus' church and there is no other scripturally-based identity for them.

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