

# Nazirites

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The 6<sup>th</sup> chapter of Numbers contains instructions for an unusual and somewhat obscure practice. It describes some of the regulations pertaining to the Nazirites. Today I would like to look at Nazirites and see what we can learn about this practice.

Let's turn to Numbers 6. Many of the rules pertained to priests, but this was a means for a not-priestly man or woman to separate, consecrate and devote themselves to the service of God. As we read it, keep in mind that in most cases the words "separate" or "consecrate", which occur frequently in this chapter, come from the same related words (**nazar** and **nezer**) as Nazirite. [Regulations: 1) Voluntary. 2) No wine, alcohol, or grape products. 3) no razor on his head, no hair cutting. 4) no dead body, not even parents.]

(Num 6:1-21 NKJV) "Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, (2) "Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: 'When either a man or woman consecrates an offering to take the vow of a Nazirite, to **separate** himself to the LORD, [**alcohol, or vinegar, and all grape products:**] (3) 'he shall **separate** himself from wine and *similar* drink; he shall drink neither vinegar made from wine nor vinegar made from *similar* drink; neither shall he drink any grape juice, nor eat fresh grapes or raisins. (4) 'All the days of his **separation** he shall eat nothing that is produced by the grapevine, from seed to skin. [**no hair cutting:**] (5) 'All the days of the vow of his **separation** no razor shall come upon his head; until the days are fulfilled for which he **separated** himself to the LORD, he shall be holy. *Then* he shall let the locks of the hair of his head grow. [**no dead bodies:**] (6) 'All the days that he **separates** himself to the LORD he shall not go near a dead body. (7) 'He shall not make himself unclean even for his father or his mother, for his brother or his sister, when they die, because his **separation** to God *is* on his head. [**defilement:**] (8) 'All the days of his **separation** he shall be holy to the LORD. (9) 'And if anyone dies very suddenly beside him, and he defiles his **consecrated** head, then he shall shave his head on the day of his cleansing; on the seventh day he shall shave it. (10) 'Then on the eighth day he shall bring two turtledoves or two young pigeons to the priest, to the door of the tabernacle of meeting; (11) 'and the priest shall offer one as a sin offering and *the* other as a burnt offering, and make atonement for him, because he sinned by reason of the *dead* body; and he shall sanctify his head that same day. (12) 'He shall **consecrate** to the LORD the days of his **separation**, and bring a male lamb in its first year as a trespass offering; but the former days shall be lost, because his **separation** was defiled. [**completion of vow:**] (13) 'Now this *is* the law of the Nazirite: When the days of his **separation** are fulfilled, he shall be brought to the door of the tabernacle of meeting. [(14) 'And he shall present his offering to the LORD: one male lamb in its first year without blemish as a burnt offering, one ewe lamb in its first year without blemish as a **sin offering**, one ram without blemish as a peace offering, (15) 'a basket of unleavened bread, cakes of fine flour mixed with oil, unleavened wafers anointed with oil, and their grain offering with their drink offerings. (16) 'Then the priest shall bring *them* before the LORD and offer his sin offering and his burnt offering; (17) 'and he shall offer the ram as a sacrifice of peace offering to the LORD, with the basket of unleavened bread; the priest shall also offer its grain offering and its drink offering. (18) 'Then the Nazirite shall shave his **consecrated** head *at* the door of the tabernacle of meeting, and shall take the hair from his **consecrated** head and put *it* on the fire which is under the sacrifice of the peace offering. [This is not necessarily the altar, but possibly the cooking fire. This would have applied to women as well] (19) 'And the priest shall take the boiled shoulder of the ram, one unleavened cake from the basket, and one unleavened wafer, and put *them* upon the hands of the Nazirite after he has shaved his **consecrated hair**, (20) 'and the priest shall wave them as a wave offering before the LORD; they *are* holy for the priest, together with the breast of the wave offering and the thigh of the heave offering. After that the Nazirite may drink wine.']] (21) "This is the law of the Nazirite who vows to the LORD the offering for his **separation**, and besides that, whatever else his hand is able to provide; according to the vow which he takes, so he must do according to the law of his **separation**.""

There are a lot of extra-Biblical rules and traditions regarding Nazirites, including an entire book of the Talmud. Among other things, the Mishna comments on the typical length of time of a Nazirite vow as typically being 30, 60 or 100 days. This does not seem to make the haircutting restriction very special. A clean-shaven man might grow a pretty good beard during this time, but is not entirely clear whether beards were included in the not-shaving-one's-head restriction. Some even take the prohibition against coming in contact with a dead body to mean vegetarianism.

Nazirites are not mentioned frequently in Scripture, but enough to make it sound like it was not a rare occurrence.

(Lam 4:7-8 NKJV) "Her Nazirites were brighter than snow and whiter than milk; they were more ruddy in body than rubies, *like* sapphire in their appearance. (8) *Now* their appearance is blacker than soot; they go unrecognized in the streets; their skin clings to their bones, it has become as dry as wood."

(Amos 2:11-12 NKJV) "I raised up some of your sons as prophets, and some of your young men as Nazirites. *Is it* not so, O you children of Israel?" says the LORD. (12) "But you gave the Nazirites wine to drink, and commanded the prophets saying, 'Do not prophesy!'"

(1 Macc 3:49) They brought also the priests' garments, and the firstfruits, and the tithes: and the Nazirites they stirred up, who had accomplished their days.

There is one especially well-known example of a Nazirite.

(Judg 13:5-7 NKJV) ""For behold, you shall conceive and bear a son. And no razor shall come upon his head, for the child shall be a Nazirite to God from the womb; and he shall begin to deliver Israel out of the hand of the Philistines." (6) So the woman came and told her husband, saying, "A Man of God came to me, and His countenance *was* like the countenance of the Angel of God, very awesome; but I did not ask Him where He *was* from, and He did not tell me His name. (7) "And He said to me, 'Behold, you shall conceive and bear a son. Now drink no wine or *similar* drink, **nor eat anything unclean**, for the child shall be a Nazirite to God from the womb to the day of his death.'""

(Judg 13:14 NKJV) ""She may not eat anything that comes from the vine, nor may she drink wine or *similar* drink, nor eat anything unclean. All that I commanded her let her observe.'""

Note that Samson was not a voluntary Nazirite. He did not take a Nazirite vow. It was something imposed on him by his parents, and in this case, God Himself. He was what some have labeled a "permanent" Nazirite. As such, he was not confined to all of the regulations that governed voluntary Nazirites. For example, Samson found himself surrounded by dead bodies on several occasions, yet his Nazirite status continued. (Judg 14:8-10 NKJV) "After some time, when he returned to get her, he turned aside to see the carcass of the lion. And behold, a swarm of bees and honey *were* in the carcass of the lion. (9) He took some of it in his hands and went along, eating. When he came to his father and mother, he gave *some* to them, and they also ate. But he did not tell them that he had taken the honey out of the carcass of the lion. (10) So his father went down to the woman. And Samson gave a feast there, for young men used to do so." Perhaps even the prohibitions on wine and grapes were not in force either. It was for his mother, at least until his birth, but nothing is said directly about Samson. The word "feast" in verse 10 is *mishteh*, a word that implies drinking. And one would think that if wine were strictly prohibited for Samson, the focus on cutting his hair to break his Nazirite vow would have been more easily satisfied by slipping him some wine.

(Judg 16:17 NKJV) "that he told her all his heart, and said to her, "No razor has ever come upon my head, for I *have been* a Nazirite to God from my mother's womb. If I am shaven, then my strength will leave me, and I shall become weak, and be like any *other* man.'""

What about other Nazirites? There is nothing definite said, but there are a few possibilities for others.

(1 Sam 1:11 NKJV) "Then she made a vow and said, "O LORD of hosts, if You will indeed look on the affliction of your maidservant and remember me, and not forget your maidservant, but will give your maidservant a male child, then I will give him to the LORD all the days of his life, and no razor shall come upon his head.'""

If this was a Nazirite vow, it was again involuntary on Samuel's part. This time, it was imposed on him from his parent's, rather than God. Probably he honored his mother and did not shave his head. (It is a little strange however that when Saul asked the medium at Endor to describe the being she saw, it was not long hair she described.) And it may have been Samuel himself who killed Agag (1 Sam 15:32-33), thereby coming in contact with a dead body. But if subject to the partial restrictions of Samson, Samuel, too, may have been a Nazirite.

(Luke 1:15 NKJV) ""For he will be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb."

John the Baptist did not drink wine. Nothing is said about long hair, but nevertheless, he may have been under at least a partial Nazirite vow from birth as well.

(Acts 18:18 NKJV) "So Paul still remained a good while. Then he took leave of the brethren and sailed for Syria, and Priscilla and Aquila *were* with him. He had *his* hair cut off at Cenchrea, for he had taken a vow."

If Paul was a Nazirite, this was undoubtedly one of the voluntary, temporary ones described in Numbers 6. But he was not at the temple when he ended this vow.

(Acts 21:23-27 NKJV) ""Therefore do what we tell you: We have four men who have taken a vow. (24) "Take them and be purified with them, and pay their expenses so that they may shave *their* heads, and that all may know that those things of which they were informed concerning you are nothing, but *that* you yourself also walk orderly and keep the law. (25) "But concerning the Gentiles who believe, we have written *and* decided that they should observe no such thing, except that they should keep themselves from *things* offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality." (26) Then Paul took the men, and the next day, having been purified with them, entered the temple to announce the expiration of the days of purification, at which time an offering should be made for each one of them. (27) And when the seven days were almost ended, the Jews from Asia, seeing him in the temple, stirred up the whole crowd and laid hands on him,"

These four men were probably Nazirites.

(Luke 2:36-37 NKJV) "Now there was one, Anna, a prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, and had lived with a husband seven years from her virginity; (37) and this woman was *a widow of about eighty-four years, who did not depart from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day.*"

Was Anna a Nazirite? Only her dedication is mentioned.

What about Jesus? He was certainly separated and consecrated for His work. (Mat 2:23 NKJV) "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.'" Many confuse the name of the city with being a Nazirite. Some feel he was a Nazirite to support their idea that Jesus may have had long hair, but there is no indication of this. Certainly Jesus did not abstain from wine. He said so himself when comparing his behavior to that of John the Baptist in (Mat 11:18-19 NKJV) ""For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.' (19) "The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look, a gluttonous man and a winebibber, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' But wisdom is justified by her children."" And unless Nazirites and long hair were extremely common in those days, Jesus would not have been able to be so easily hidden as He slipped through crowds. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that Jesus said He would no longer drink wine following His crucifixion. One might wonder if He has in some way taken a sort of Nazirite vow until He returns.

Whether it would be possible for us to take such a vow now is highly debatable. It appears to be part of the temple system, in the sense that to be released from the vow, sacrifices and temple ritual were required. But at the same time, it is important for all of us who have been chosen by God to be part of the firstfruits to dedicate our lives to the service of God. Even though we do not follow the ritual restrictions of the Nazirite, in one sense, we all need to be spiritual Nazirites.