

February 10, 2019 - Num. 6:1-21 - The Nazarite Vow

Torah Reading: Numbers 6:1-21 - The Nazarite Vow

Psalm 94:12-23

Haftarah: Judges 13:2-10, 24

The Nazarite Vow

The word Nazarite is from "*nazir*," which signifies separation. Some were appointed by God, before their birth to be Nazarites all their days, like Samson (**Judges 13:5,7**), Samuel (**1 Samuel 1:11**) and John the Baptist. These instructions are to regulate and give structure to an already existing practice of vowed to abstain from anything for religious reasons. These rules directed what was abstained from, how to be cleansed if defiled.

Although not enjoined by the Law, Nazarites were highly respected, especially those like John the Baptist who were Nazarites from birth. The least time of separation was a month (Mishna Nazir, c. 1. sect. 3. & c. 6. sect. 3.)

- **Luke 1:15** - "For he (John) shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink; and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb."

Nazarites are mentioned by Jeremiah after the destruction of Jerusalem:

- **Lamentations 4:6-8** - "The punishment of the daughter of my people is greater than that of Sodom, which was overthrown in an instant without a hand turned toward her. Her Nazarites were brighter than snow, whiter than milk; their bodies were more ruddy than rubies, their appearance like sapphires. But now their appearance is blacker than soot; they are not recognized in the streets. Their skin has shriveled on their bones; it has become as dry as a stick"

Similarly, in Amos

- **Amos 2:11-12** - "And I raised up of your sons for prophets, and of your young men for Nazarites. Is it not even thus, O ye children of Israel? saith the LORD. But ye gave the Nazarites wine to drink; and commanded the prophets, saying, Prophesy not."

And again in Jeremiah:

- **Jeremiah 7:29** - "Cut off thine hair (crown - *nezer*), O Jerusalem, and cast it away, and take up a lamentation on high places; for the LORD hath rejected and forsaken the generation of his wrath."

The imagery is from the Nazarite vow and its interruption by defilement. Just as the Nazarite was to shave his head if he was defiled by coming in contact with a corpse, Jerusalem, which had been holy, was now defiled. Jerusalem must now display her

faithlessness to her vows of loyalty to her God. (Of course, it was also a sign of mourning).

Joseph, because he was recognized as "consecrated," is also placed among the Nazarites:

- **Genesis 49:26** - "...blessings of the grain and flowers, blessings of the eternal mountains, bounty of the everlasting hills, may they descend on Joseph's head, on the crown of the one dedicated (= or consecrated, *nazir*) from among his brothers!"

- **Deuteronomy 33:16b** - "May the hair grow thick on the head of Joseph, on the brow of the consecrated (*nazir*) one among his brothers!"

Abstention from Wine

Numbers 6:1-4 - "And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, Speak unto the children of Israel, and say unto them, When either man or woman shall separate themselves to vow a vow of a Nazarite, to separate themselves unto the LORD: He shall separate himself from wine and strong drink, and shall drink no vinegar of wine, or vinegar of strong drink, neither shall he drink any liquor of grapes, nor eat moist grapes, or dried. All the days of his separation shall he eat nothing that is made of the vine tree, from the kernels even to the husk."

Rashi - Why is the section dealing with the Nazirite juxtaposed to the section of the adulterous woman? To tell us that whoever sees an adulteress in her disgrace should vow to abstain from wine, for it leads to adultery. — [Sotah 2a]

"moist grapes or dried" - Aben Ezra says this is a kind of a hedge, to keep at a distance from drinking wine itself.

Like the Ministering Priests

This abstention from wine mirrored the command that the priests abstain from wine during their time of service in the Tabernacle, a rule set down after the incident of Nadab and Abihu.

- **Leviticus 10:9** - "Do not drink wine nor strong drink, you, nor your sons with you, when you go into the tabernacle of the congregation, lest you die: it shall be a statute for ever throughout your generations" (Also **Ezekiel 44:21**)

In the New Testament, Paul enjoins that a bishop "must not be given to wine," that "deacons must not be given to much wine" (**1 Timothy 3:2-3**).

Why Take the Vow?

"to separate themselves unto the LORD" - Not to prove something, not to show yourself pious, not even in penitence for sin, but out of love to simply become closer to God.

In Days of Messiah

Remarkably, the Talmud says in the Days of Messiah, when the Son of David comes, a Nazarite will be free to drink wine on sabbath days and festivals, though not on week days (Babylonian Talmud, Erubin, fol. 43. 1.) From this it appears they seem to be conscious of a change of the ceremonial law in His days.

In fact, it is always the Sabbath, always a feast day in the presence of the Messiah:

- **Luke 7:33-35** - "For John the Baptist came neither eating bread nor drinking wine, and you say, 'He has a demon!' The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and you say, 'Look at this glutton and drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and of sinners!' But wisdom is vindicated by all her children."

Jesus turned the water into wine at the wedding at Cana, and gave new meaning to the Passover wine at His Last Supper. He touched the dead,

Hair!

Numbers 6:5 - "All the days of the vow of his separation there shall no razor come upon his head: until the days be fulfilled, in the which he separateth himself unto the LORD, he shall be holy, and shall let the locks of the hair of his head grow."

In contrast, the High Priest was forbidden to let his hair "grow wild" - "he shall not leave his hair unshorn" (**Leviticus 21:10**).

Long hair, left to grow wild (the use of a comb was forbidden because hair might be "shorn" in combing - Naz. vi. 3) was a mark of humility. Hair is associated with sin and with "enemies."

- **Psalm 40:12** - "For innumerable evils have compassed me about: mine iniquities have taken hold upon me, so that I am not able to look up; they are more than the hairs of mine head: therefore my heart faileth me."

- **Psalm 69:4** - "Those who hate me without cause outnumber the hairs of my head; many are those who would destroy me--my enemies without cause."

Thus, this display served as a continual confession of one's sins and spiritual weakness and vulnerability, and that humility was called the Nazarite's "crown."

Samson's strength was increased while his hair was long. His humility however never kicked in until the end. Samson was a special case - he touched plenty of dead bodies as a warrior without incurring defilement, wasn't especially holy, and this bothered the rabbis, who speculated about the meaning of his status.

Another questionable Nazarite was Absalom, David's rebellious son:

"Absalom was a life-Nazirite, for it says, 'And it came to pass at the end of forty years that Absalom said to the king: [pray thee, let me go and pay my vow which I have vowed unto the Lord in Hebron.'" (See **2 Samuel 14:25-26; 2 Samuel 15:7**)

- Babylonian Talmud: Tractate Nazir, Folio 4b

A Crown

With different vowel points, "*Nazir*" becomes "*Nezer*," which means "crown."

The Targum of Jonathan renders it, "the crown of his God"

"Nazir" also refers to the "crown" of the holy anointing oil used to sanctify people and objects to God (**Leviticus 21:12**) and to the crowns of Israel's kings (**2 Samuel 1:10; 2 Kings 11:12; Zechariah 9:16**)

Like the Levitical priesthood the Nazarites were permitted to assemble within the precincts of the Temple and were provided with their own special enclosure known as the Nazirite's Chamber.

At the end of the Nazarite vow, the hair was shorn and then thrown into the fire under the cauldron that was boiling the cut-up animal offered as the Peace Offering. This shows that our hair/sins therefore serve a purpose in bringing us to humility, which results in our partaking of the Peace Offering.

Defilement from Touching a Dead Body

Numbers 6:6-7 - "All the days that he separateth himself unto the LORD he shall come at no dead body. He shall not make himself unclean for his father, or for his mother, for his brother, or for his sister, when they die: because the consecration of his God is upon his head."

Like the High Priest, he was not allowed to be present even at the death of his father or mother, etc.

Spiritually, a funeral procession always gives way to the wedding procession:

- **Matthew 8:21-22** - "And another of his disciples said unto him, Lord, suffer me first to go and bury my father. But Jesus said unto him, Follow me; and let the dead bury their dead."

The "touching of a dead body" is spiritually analogous to our response/dependence on our flesh, or self, relying on the old man Adam, seeing the world from his viewpoint instead of from God's. Each time, then, we start over and go back to the cross to be cleansed from defilement and consecrate ourselves afresh to God.

"to the door of the Tabernacle" - He could not enter because he was defiled.

Nazarite as Opposing Self-love

There is a rabbinical tale similar to the Narcissus myth in the earliest versions of the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmud compilations about a handsome Nazarite:

The high-priest, Simeon the Just — to whom tradition ascribes so much that is good and noble — declared that he had uniformly refused, except in one instance, to partake of the trespass-offering of Nazarites, since such vows were so often made rashly, and the sacrifice was afterwards offered reluctantly, not with pious intent. A fair youth, with beautiful hair, had presented himself for such a vow, with whom the high-priest had expostulated: 'My son, what could have induced thee to destroy such splendid hair?' To which the youth replied: 'I fed my father's flock, and as I was about to draw water for it from a brook, I saw my wraith, and the evil spirit seized and would have destroyed me (probably by vanity). Then I exclaimed: Miserable fool, why boastest thou in a possession which does not belong to thee, who art so soon to be the portion of maggots and worms? By the Temple! I cut off my hair, to devote it to God.' 'Upon this,' said Simeon, 'I rose and kissed him on the forehead, saying, Oh that many in Israel were like thee! Thou hast truly, and in the spirit of the Law, made this vow according to the will of God.' - Nedarim 9b, by way of Alfred Edersheim's 'The Temple'

Other Nazarites in the New Testament

There are several instances of Christians taking the Nazarite vow, while the Temple still stood:

If we are to believe the legend of Hegesippus quoted by Eusebius (Church History II. 23), James the Less, Bishop of Jerusalem, lived as a Nazarite.

In **Acts 21:18-26**, the leaders of the church in Jerusalem (James is not specifically mentioned) requested that Paul, as a sign of good faith and solidarity with his Jewish brethren, sponsor four Nazirites who had completed their vow period: "So the next day Paul took the men along and was purified with them, and he visited the Temple to give notice of the time when the period of purification would be over and the offering would have to be presented on behalf of each of them."

Paul submitted to an Old Covenant ritual which no longer had any real meaning in the New Covenant of Jesus Christ, for every Christian had now been consecrated to accepting a lifetime of service, as "living sacrifices" in the royal priesthood of believers.

Paul shaved his head at Cenchrea (**Acts 18:18**), although according to the law (Numbers 6:9,18) and the Talmud the shaving of the head was required to be done at the door of the temple.

The Nazarite laws could only be kept in Erez Israel, according to the rabbis.

Helena, Queen of Adiabene, once vowed Nazariteship for seven years, and fulfilled her vow; but when she went to the land of Israel at the end of the seventh year, the Bet Hillel decided that she must observe her vow for another period of seven years, since the time which she had spent outside of the land of Israel could not be taken into account.

Opposing Viewpoints on the Nazarite Vow

Some later rabbis, probably in response to the Christian emphasis on fasting and asceticism, took a dim view of the Nazarite vow, and indeed any vows.

"Our sages commanded man to deny himself only the things denied him by the Torah. He should not inflict on himself vows of abstinence on things permitted him.... Our Sages forbade a man to mortify himself with fasting. To such things King Solomon referred when he counseled: 'Be not righteous overmuch; neither make thyself over wise; why shouldst thou destroy thyself?' (**Ecclesiastes 7:16**)"

This was also in protest against the excessive mourning after the destruction of the Second Temple, when large numbers of Jews became ascetics, vowing not to eat meat or to drink wine.

- **Matthew 9:14-17** - "Can the friends of the bridegroom mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast." - The dark days when Jesus was in the tomb are referred to here.

While the Bridegroom is present, his disciples do not fast. Fasting, however, is an option provided to help bring us back to the understanding that the Bridegroom is present with us now.

The true spiritual fast is a fast from self that is continual:

- **Isaiah 58:6** - "Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke?" (read the whole chapter)

Vows

Jesus' attitude toward vows might also apply:

- **Matthew 5:34** - "But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne."

Recall Amos' statement: God says, "I raised up... your young men for Nazarites."

This shows that whatever the spiritual blessings embodied in the Nazarite, it is not our personal choice to make a vow, but rather God's calling and sufficiency that is involved.

Perhaps this is related to Jesus' saying about abstaining in various ways including marriage and remaining single:

- **Matthew 19:12** - "For there are some eunuchs, which were so born from their mother's womb: and there are some eunuchs, which were made eunuchs of men: and there be eunuchs, which have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake. He that is able to receive it, let him receive it."

And Paul, counseling married couples to not abstain from sexual relations "except by agreement for a time that you may devote yourselves to prayer," he comments on his own situation regarding his single status: "Yet I wish that all men were even as I myself am. However, each man has his own gift from God, one in this manner, and another in that" (**1 Corinthians 7:4-11**).

Set Apart / Consecrated / Sanctified

The idea is that the ability to "separate ourselves unto the Lord" or to abstain from one thing or another is a gift of God, not something we choose or try to force ourselves to do. He accomplished it already:

- **1 Corinthians 6:11** - "And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God."

- **Hebrews 10:10** - "By the which will we are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all."

More on Nazarite Vow

Elijah, in whose Spirit John the Baptist came, may have been a Nazarite

2 Kings 1:8 - "And they answered him, He was an hairy man, and girt with a girdle of leather about his loins. And he said, It is Elijah the Tishbite."

"an hairy man" = *se`ar ba`al* - "a lord of hair"

Also, Elisha may have taken a Nazarite vow:

2 Kings 2:23 - "And he went up from thence unto Bethel: and as he was going up by the way, there came forth little children out of the city, and mocked him, and said unto him, Go up, thou bald head; go up, thou bald head."

Possibly Elisha was "bald" because he had recently shaved off his hair at the end of a Nazarite vow.

See <https://theopolisinstitute.com/author/james-b-jordan>

Another View

The uncut hair of the Nazarite may represent the Sabbath rest.

<https://lutheranguest.blogspot.com/2008/06/was-samuel-really-nazirite.html>

First, God prohibited Israelites from shaving the corners of their head or beards (**Leviticus 19:27**). But God also prohibited reaping (or "shaving") the corners of the fields (**Leviticus 19:9, 23:22**). Perhaps also pertinent is that Israelites were to have untrimmed corners to their clothes (**Numbers 15:38, Deuteronomy 22:12**).

In Sabbath years, however, fields were to be entirely uncut. The poor were allowed to gather whatever grew (**Exodus 23:10-11**). So the whole field was to be a gleaning for the poor.

Ordinarily, the corners of the hair were to be left uncut. But, for a Nazarite, the whole head was to be left uncut. Perhaps like the fields. Ordinarily, only the corners of the fields were to be left uncut for gleanings. But during Sabbath years, the whole field was to be left uncut and available for gleaning.

So the person with uncut hair represented the person at God's entire disposal -- just like the uncut field did not serve its human owner's purposes, but was entirely at the disposal of others. While this set of individuals includes Nazarites, it would not be limited to Nazarites.

Exodus 20:25 seems to fit in here as well, "If you make an altar of stone for me, you shall not build it of cut stones, for if you wield your tool on it, you will profane it." Christians are "living stones" in God's temple (**1 Peter 2:5**). The OT person with uncut hair could illustrate the unprofaned, living stone, who qualifies to be built into God's true temple.