

Nazarites

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NAZARITE – from [Heb *nāzîr*—‘consecrated one,’ < *nāzar*, ‘to consecrate’; cf. also *nādar*—‘to vow’; Gk *nazeiraios*, plus various words indicating “holiness” or “devotion.” The basic meaning of the different Hebrew and Greek terms is that of “one consecrated, a devotee.”

Origin and Nature The Nazarites were an ancient order of persons consecrated to God by means of a vow. This order was the Israelite counterpart of the votive persons commonly found in ancient Near Eastern religions. Precisely when the institution originated is unknown, but when the regulations governing the Nazarites were laid down in the time of Moses (Num. 6:1–21) it seems possible that they were intended to normalize a tradition that was already of some antiquity, and bring it firmly within the life of the covenant community.

The role of Nazarite was that of a votary, a sacred person who was consecrated to divine service for a specific period of time as the result of a vow and as an expression of special commitment to God. The nature of this relationship was given formal legal expression in Numbers 6, and was distinctive in character on several counts.

A Nazarite could be one whose vow was made for him without his knowledge or approval, as with Samuel, who was offered to God in a vow made by his mother (1 S. 1:11). It is conceivable that Hannah herself was a Nazarite, since she was familiar with the general prescriptions, but the narrative does not mention her in such a capacity. Another involuntary Nazarite was Samson (Judges 13:3–5), who was proclaimed a person consecrated to God according to Nazarite tradition in an annunciation.

But the Nazarite could also enter into a relationship with God in full awareness of what would be

involved. Some scholars have thought of an “early” Nazarite tradition, in which an individual such as Samson or Saul was pledged or pledged himself in a lifelong charismatic dedication, as contrasted with a “late” tradition, represented for them by the Numbers regulations, where the commitment was of a temporary nature.

The Samson narratives do not mention the prohibition about contact with corpses, and Samson had a great deal of such contact in his exploits. Those who assign an early date to the enactments in Numbers find the distinction between “early” and “late” Nazarite traditions unsupported by the text. The nature of the Nazarite vocation was consistently that of a distinctive, holy person who had dedicated himself to divine service and in return received certain spiritual endowments.

Regulations Basic to the Nazarite’s status was the vow, which when made voluntarily was probably marked by a ceremony of dedication that included a consecrated offering (cf. Nu. 6:2, New King James Version). This marked the point of separation, which itself had two aspects, one “to the Lord,” implying a definite spiritual relationship that may not have been particularly observable in others, while the second separated the Nazarite from certain contemporary customs and attitudes. He was to abstain from the fruit of the vine in any form, a prohibition that worked some hardship in a land where clean water was scarce and fermented drinks were the normal adult beverage. Yet this regulation alone made for distinctiveness in a cultural environment where alcoholism was an extremely serious social problem, and could leave no doubt as to the status of the Nazarite. It also recaptured the stern life-style followed by the desert nomads of the wilderness period, and contrasted it

forcibly with the far less rigorous sedentary life in Canaan, with its attendant moral temptations.

Equally distinctive was the prohibition against shaving or cutting the hair during the period of the vow (Nu. 6:5). The Nazarite's life was to be analogous to that of the unpruned vine (*nāzîr*) of Lev. 25:11; the vine was deliberately left untended for the first few years of its life so that thereafter its fruit would be mature. The Nazarite's entire body, including the hair, belonged to God, and if the hair remained untrimmed it would serve as a witness against any who shaved the head in the service of pagan deities.

The priestly nature of the Nazarite's witness was indicated by regulations forbidding consumption of unclean food (Judges 13:7) and contact with a corpse (Numbers 6:6f), because of its defiling nature. Such a prohibition also applied to Aaron and his descendants (Lev. 21:1), except that they were excused when the deceased was a close relative. The Nazarite, like the high priest of Israel, was to be consecrated to God and serve as an example of a strict, obedient life of the kind demanded by the Sinai covenant. If the Nazarite became accidentally defiled by a dead person, he had to shave his hair off and make an offering to God to remove the defilement. Then if he so desired he could undertake an entirely fresh vow of consecration and separation.

When the period of a voluntary vow had ended, the Nazarite brought an offering to the door of the tabernacle and the sacrifice was performed by the priest. At that time the Nazarite's hair was shorn and burned, signifying publicly the termination of the vow (Nu. 6:13–20).

Nazarites in Scripture In the Old Testament the only lifelong Nazarites mentioned were Samson and Samuel. Whereas the former was especially designated in this way by an angel from God (Judges 13:7), a commitment that was subsequently acknowledged by Samson himself (Judges 16:17), Samuel was nowhere mentioned in the MT as a Nazarite.

In the New Testament John the Baptist was the most outstanding example of a Nazarite, and may well have begun a fashion that other ascetic Christians emulated. While Jesus was a Nazarene (that is, from Nazareth, Mt. 2:23) He was not a Nazarite, and as such He contrasted Himself to John (Matt. 11:18f). Paul had evidently taken a Nazarite's vow which he began to terminate at Cenchrea by cutting off his hair (Acts 18:18), and which was completed formally in Jerusalem with other Christians under Nazarite vows (Acts 21:23f).

Later Developments By the New Testament period the Nazarite tradition was probably being encouraged in some areas of Essene life. According to Eusebius (*HE* ii.23.3), James the brother of Christ seemed to belong to a Nazarite group, as did a certain Bannus, tutor of Josephus, who was probably the Buni mentioned in T.B. *Sanhedrin* 43a as a disciple of Jesus. The vow taken by the immoral Bernice, the sister-wife of Herod Agrippa II (Acts 25:13), was apparently Nazarite in character (cf. Josephus BJ ii.15.1 [313f]). Josephus also recorded that on his return from Rome Agrippa was a benefactor to some Nazarites seeking release from their vows (*Ant.* xix.6.1 [294]). In the Mishnah the burning of the hair was recognized as an offering to God (*Nazir* iv.7; this entire tractate deals with the Nazarite vow).