

# The Nazirite Vow

## Numbers 6:1-21

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### Introduction

There is very little information from ancient documents or epigraphy to enlighten us about the practice of the nazirite vow. Scholars conjecture about what it meant to be a nazirite. Numbers 6:1-21 provides some ritual guidelines from which scholars try to construct a picture together with the narratives on Samson (Judges 13:5; 16:17) and the prophet Samuel<sup>1</sup>, and a comment by Amos that God had given Israel the nazirites and prophets but Israel had caused the nazirites to drink wine and commanded the prophets not to prophesy (Amos 2:11-12). Extra-biblical material is, likewise, sparse and mainly comes from the second temple period (Zangenberg, 2007, pp. 362-364).

### The Book of Numbers

The book of Numbers provides a narrative of the wilderness wanderings of Israel between their time in the wilderness of Sinai (Num 1:1) and when they were on the plains of Moab ready to enter the Promised Land (Num 36:13). Numbers includes a wide variety of literary forms including passages of laws and rituals, instructions for worship, census lists, journey records, legal disputes, battle descriptions, poetry, and blessings. Numbers 6 is of the religious instruction genre and is located amongst material associated with the general theme of the holiness of God and his people, which also underlies this passage.

### Date and Authorship

The authorship of Numbers in its present form is generally not believed to be Moses himself. The book probably received its final form some time after Moses, possibly as late as the exile, making use of material written<sup>2</sup> by Moses and his contemporaries (Brueggemann, 2003, p. 77).

The passage is introduced by, “The Lord spoke to Moses” (Num 6:1). This means that whoever wrote this section, if it was not Moses himself, had knowledge of Moses' teaching. Some scholars see this phrase as a mere marker phrase<sup>3</sup> and suggest that the passage was added to Numbers in post-exilic times to regulate second temple ritual (de Hemmer Gudme, 2009, p. 69). If such is the case, the use of deceit to give authority to the passage would make it unworthy of inclusion in Scripture. In accordance with the book's acceptance by the church in the canon of Scripture, the view will be taken in this essay that the passage represents the teaching of Moses during Israel's wilderness wanderings and refers to the ritual procedures to be carried out in the tabernacle as stated in Num 6:10, 13 & 18.

### The Nazirite in the Old Testament

The passage provides ritual regulation of the nazirite vow but does not define it. The Hebrew term *nāzîr* has been analysed for answers. It meant to consecrate, separate, abstain (Douglas, 1962, p.

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1 The prophet Samuel displayed some of the characteristics of a nazirite. His mother, Hannah, vowed that he would be one (1 Sam 1:11). However, Scripture gives no further indication that he was one (Harrison, 1969, p. 705). Ashley said, “The text says only that Samuel was “given” (*natan*) to Yahweh” and that commentary in the Mishnah and Dead Sea Scrolls are inconclusive (Ashley, 1993, p. 139).

2 The material may have been transmitted in oral form as suggested by form critics, but due to the large amount of material, it is unlikely that this could apply to the whole of the work.

3 For other instances of this phrase see Numbers 1:1; 2:1; 3:5, 11, 44; 4:1, 21; 5:1, 5, 11; 6:22.

871), dedicate (Sturdy, 1976, p.48), devote as “an expression of loyalty to God in which forms of abstinence are illustrative rather than constitutive” (Rylaarsdam, 1962, 526). Others see *nāzîr* as a pre-Israelite term meaning “to vow”, hence a nazirite was one who was vowed to divine service (Harrison, 1969, p. 705). Morris Jastrow thought that *nāzîr* was “merely an old designation of priest” (Jastrow, 1913, p. 185). Walther Eichrodt saw the nazirite as a charismatic leader who responded to his calling and equipping by God by vowing obedience (Eichrodt, 1961, p.303-306).

Although Num 6:13-21 deals with the ritual to conclude a nazirite vow, this does not preclude the possibility of life-long vows such as that of Samson<sup>4</sup>. Some scholars<sup>5</sup> have argued from comments in 1 Macabees 3:49, Josephus, and the Mishnah, that vows for specific periods were a later development and that the ancient practice was a life-long vow (Ashley, 1993, p. 138). However, this theory rests on the circular argument that Numbers 6 must have been written in the post-exilic period because it focuses on short term vows.

## The Nazirite Vow

The vow itself was seen as sacred (Milgrom, 1990, p. 47)<sup>6</sup>. The person making the vow was not transformed into a “holy person” as such, but a person obligated to fulfil a vow to God. A vow made in the name of the Lord invoked God's participation and had to be fulfilled (Num 30:2). The various prohibitions acted in a symbolic way, as did the ritual surrounding them. God's revelation is conveyed in the ritual that the text describes.

## Commentary

### *Numbers 6:1-8. Rules during the vow.*

A nazirite could be male or female (Num 6:2)<sup>7</sup>. The nazirite had to abstain from three things.

1. Num 6:3-4 prohibits drinking wine or other strong drink and eating any grape products. Some see in this prohibition a parallel with the requirements for a priest on duty and a concern for sobriety while carrying out official duties (Jastrow, 1913, p. 185). This would not satisfactorily explain the complaint of Amos.<sup>8</sup>

The grapes brought back by the spies from the promised land were symbolic of the fruitfulness of the land that the Lord was giving Israel (Num 13:23 & 27). The land was

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4 Samson's failure to fulfil the nazirite vow as depicted in Num 6 presents a difficulty in understanding what a nazirite was. J. Cheryl Exum thought that the focus of the Samson saga was really prayer and not the nazirite vow (Exum, 1983). Some have suggested the answer is that the term nazirite was “loosely applied to one devoted to Yahweh” (Douglas, 1962, p. 872). Others suggest the abstentions of the nazirite vow of Samson's mother were shared between Samson and his mother (Levine, 1993, p. 230) (Diamond, 1997, p. 7).

5 G. B. Gray, J. C. Rylaarsdam, Klein, Budd, Noth (Ashley, 1993, p. 138).

6 Eliezer Diamond offers an alternative view. He understands “the Nazirite as a self-sacrifice, with one's hair representing one's entire being” (Diamond, 1997, p. 18). He proposes that the nazirite was “both officiant and offering: one who offers himself symbolically by growing his hair in ritual purity” (p. 1). In dedicating him or herself, the nazirite was the officiant of the vow (p.4) and had priest-like status (p. 6).

7 Num 30:3-16 gives some additional rules for the vows of women.

8 The nazirite's sobriety alone would not constitute a reason for Israel to be faithful to God. Jastrow argues that Amos 2:11-12 in grouping together nazirites and prophets is similar to the coupling of prophets and priests elsewhere in Scripture (e.g. Jer 5:31; 26:11 & 16) and that *nāzîr* is an old term for priest.

later to be referred to as the Lord's vineyard (e.g. Jer 12:10). The nazirite vow did not reject the Lord's provision as being a distraction from personal piety. It acknowledged that the promised land was God's provision, his vineyard. The nazirite honoured the Lord by not partaking of the fruit of the vine, symbols of the Lord's provision and promise.<sup>9</sup> Neither was the abstention from vineyard products for the benefit of the nazirite, but to remind Israel to be faithful to the Lord (Amos 2:11-12).<sup>10</sup>

2. Num 6:5 prohibits the cutting of the hair. The uncut (or consecrated) hair, was a sign of the vow, and was to be shaved and burned at the termination of the vow. Olyan noted that shaving rites are involved in a number of biblical rituals (e.g. mourning, purification, humiliation). He thought that shaving rites must be understood in their cultural setting. The common factor in Israelite culture's shaving rites was their signalling a transition in ritual status (Olyan, 1998, p. 622). In the case of Num 6:18, shaving the hair was a sign of the nazirites' aggregation into the general community (p. 621).
3. Num 6:6-8 prohibits going near to a corpse and becoming ritually unclean.

***Numbers 6:9-12. Ritual to restore an accidentally broken vow.***

Although the nazirite vow could not be wilfully broken, it was possible for it to be accidentally broken in the case of the nazirite being present when someone unexpectedly died. In that case, a ritual procedure was given for recommencing the vow as follows.

1. Seven days after the defilement, the nazirite was to shave their head (Num 6:9).
2. On the eighth day they are to bring two turtle-doves, or two young pigeons, to the priest at the tabernacle (Num 6:10).
3. The priest shall offer one turtle-dove as a sin-offering (Num 6:11) "to bring back into a right-relationship with God as man who has ... violated a cultic law" (Sturdy, 1976, p. 51).
4. The other turtle-dove was offered as a burnt-offering (Num 6:11). This is a purification offering (Sturdy, 1976, p. 51).
5. The priest would make atonement for the nazirite for the ritual guilt (Num 6:11)<sup>11</sup>.
6. The nazirite was to sanctify the head that same day to re-commence the vow (Num 6:11-12).<sup>12</sup>
7. The nazirite then was to bring a male lamb as a guilt-offering (Num 6:12).

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9 This is reminiscent of when David refused to drink the water that was brought to him at such great risk to the men's lives who obtained it (2 Sam 23:15-17). It did not mean there was anything wrong with the water or, for the nazirite, the vine products.

10 It has also been suggested that the abstinence from wine was a protest against the Canaanite culture during the wilderness tradition (Anderson, 1966, p. 235). This reasoning is not convincing, since Israel's wilderness wanderings were not because of a desire for a nomadic lifestyle.

11 Snaith discussed the confusion and overlap in meanings of the sin-offering and the guilt-offering and suggested that the difference was that the sin-offering was concerned with unintentional offences and the guilt-offering was concerned with offences where assessable damage was done (Snaith, 1965, p. 73). Israel Knohl says of the guilt offering in Num 6, "The main issue here is not the sacrifice but rather the purity and sanctity of the Nazirite (Knohl, 2004, p. 526).

12 The period specified in the original vow had to start over again from the beginning.

Jacob Milgrom, a Jewish scholar<sup>13</sup>, commented on the break in the normal order of sacrifices at step 6, “This break is unprecedented, for in every other biblical rite the prescribed sacrifices follow each other without interruption. In this case, the act of reconsecration could have taken place before or after the sacrificial service.” Milgrom speculated that the reason for this was that an offender could not receive expiation until he had repaid “the sanctuary for the desecrated sanctum.” Milgrom says (referencing Lev 5:14-16) that the vow and hair must be reconsecrated before divine forgiveness can be given (Milgrom, 1990, p.47).

A Christian perspective might be that although the sequence of sin-offering and burnt-offering followed by rededication, and then guilt-offering (guilt|repentance|forgiveness) is logical, it is not consequential, and it does not imply that God withheld forgiveness until he was offered sacrifices and rededication. The ritual acknowledged human failure and gave the opportunity to make good on the vow resting in the knowledge of the forgiveness of a gracious God. The placement of the rededication of the nazirite vow in the centre of the ritual avoided, on the one hand, being presumptive about God's willingness to forgive, and on the other hand, the appearance of manipulating God to grant forgiveness. The order of the ritual encouraged the failed nazirite to approach a holy God with humility.<sup>14</sup>

### ***Numbers 6:13-21. Ritual for concluding the vow.***

The ritual procedure at the completion of the votive period was as follows.

1. The nazirite was brought to the entrance to the tabernacle (Num 6:13).
2. The nazirite gave the priest one male one-year-old lamb for a burnt-offering, one ewe lamb for a sin-offering, one ram for a well-being offering, and unleavened bread, cakes, and wafers with grain and drink-offerings (Num 6:14-15).
3. The priest presented the offerings before the Lord (Num 6:16-17).
4. The nazirite shaved off his or her hair and burned it with the well-being offering (Num 6:18). The hair was sacred and had to be disposed of.
5. The priest placed the offerings in the hands of the nazirite and then raised them as an elevation-offering (on the nazirite's behalf), after which the nazirite was free of the restrictions of the nazirite vow (Num 6:19-20).

## **Conclusion**

The text is an example of God accommodating revelation to Israel's culture. The revelation, which concerns Israel's relationship to a holy God, is expressed through the nazirite vow ritual of ancient Israel, which is now strange and obscure to us. Nazirites were people who were aware of God's calling on their lives. They expressed their dedication in a vow, as was the custom of the time. The nazirites, their vows, and Israel's sacrificial system are collectively used in this passage to reveal that God does not want his holiness to prevent his people from relating to him.<sup>15</sup>

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13 The referenced commentaries by Christian scholars (Ashley, Levine, Sturdy and Thompson) did not comment on this, possibly because they did not notice its significance.

14 The need for humility here is analogous to the need for a right attitude towards fasting for fasting to be acceptable to the Lord (Ps 69:10; Is 58:4-6).

15 God's instruction to “be holy, for I am holy” (Lev 11:45) was not intended as an impossibly high standard humanity had to meet, but the divine will in the best interests of people made in the image of a holy God.

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