

The Doctrine of the Nazirite

1. The first thing that we need to look at is the word itself. Nazirite (or, Nazarite¹) is a transliteration. The Hebrew word is nâzîyr (נָזִיר) [pronounced *naw-ZEER*] and we have seen this word thrice previously in Scripture: Gen. 49:26 Lev. 25:5, 11. In Gen. 49:26, we are given the renderings *distinguished* (NASB), *him that was separate* (KJV), *who was set apart from* (NRSV), and *separate* (Young's); and it is almost ignored, but footnoted as *the one separated from* in the NIV. Strong's #5139 BDB #634
 - a. The very first use of this word or any of its cognates is in Gen. 49:26a, c reads: *The blessing of your father...may they be on the head of Joseph, and on the crown of the head of the one distinguished among his brothers.* Young renders this *separate [from]*; and Rotherham renders it *set apart*. As a matter of fact, although there are several Hebrew words rendered, in various places, *set apart*, *separated*; this seems to be the chief word used for a *separation to God*. The concept here is that Joseph was different from his brothers, separated into a position of leadership.
 - b. In Lev. 25:5, 11, this word is incorrectly translated *untrimmed vines* (NASB), *untended vines* (NIV), and *unpruned vine* (NRSV), *undressed vine* (KJV). It might be better if you saw the verse itself; Gen. 25:3–5: *'Six years you will sow your field, and six years you will prune your vineyard, and you will gather its increase and in the seventh year, a Sabbath of rest to the land, a Sabbath unto Jehovah; your field you will not sow and your vineyard you will not prune; the spontaneous growth of your harvest you will not reap, and the grapes of your separated thing you will not gather, a year of rest it is to the land.* This was the unobserved Sabbath Year, for which Israel was placed into bondage, one year for each Sabbath Year that they ignored. They were not to harvest anything from their field; they were to allow it to remain *unshorn, uncut, a separated thing* to God. There is a connection here, but it is more of a tongue-in-cheek nuance by God. The idea is certainly *separation*; however, the person who takes the vows of the Nazirite and does not trim his hair looks like these vines which have not been pruned or harvested. The simple visual image of the Nazirite with unshorn hair is to God like the vines and trees and plants which have not been tended to during the Sabbath year. Obviously, when you have to explain a joke, it just isn't going to be as funny.
 - c. We next find this word in the book of Numbers (Num. 6:2, 13, 18–21 where it is transliterated by most translators (KJV, NKJV, NASB, NIV, NRSV, Young). The only person that I can find who actually translates this in Num. 6 is Rotherham, who renders it *the One Separated*. For those of you who did not go through the book of Numbers with me, you had no idea, up until this time that the word found here and in Lev. 25:5, 11 were the same word.
 - d. Cognates:
 - i. The verb for *separate*, the verbal cognate for this noun, is also found throughout these verses in Num. 6. It is nâzar (נָזַר) [pronounced *naw-ZAHR*] and it is translated *to take the vows of a Nazirite, to live as a Nazirite*; and more simply *to separate, to consecrate* (Lev. 15:31 22:2 Num. 6:2–3, 5–6, 12 Ezek. 14:7 Hos. 9:10 Zech. 7:3). Strong's #5144 BDB #634.
 - ii. A related noun is nêzer (נֵזֶר) [pronounced *nay-ZER*], which means *crown, consecration, Naziriteship*. For its rendering as *crown*, see Ex. 29:6 39:30 Lev. 8:9 21:12. Strong's #5145 BDB #634
 - e. What happened is the God Himself coined these terms out from the Hebrew language. We have the concept of separation, crown and untrimmed bushes, three concepts which would have seemed, at first, to be totally unrelated. However, the connection between these various renderings of these various words should now become more obvious. It is a crown which separates one man entirely from every other man; the crown is on the head and the Nazirites crown is his hair, which is untrimmed, like the vines during the Sabbath Year. These are words which probably began with a common meanings and Yahweh coined them to mean *Nazarite, to become a Nazarite*.
2. Now that we have beaten the vocabulary with a stick, we may wonder just what is the deal with the Nazirite; just what exactly did God expect of them?
 - a. First of all, a vow was taken, a special vow, which separated he (or she) unto God (Num. 6:2).
 - b. The Nazirite is to not only abstain from wine and strong drink, but from anything which comes from the grape vine, including fresh grapes. The grape vine is representative of happiness on earth and in earthly

¹ I will have you know that it made me grimace to render the transliteration as *Nazirite* as opposed to *Nazarite*; when you learn something one way, it is hard to unlearn it.

things. It is not evil—don't get weird on me—it is simply a representation of God blessing man on earth (Num. 6:3–4).

- c. During the time of this vow (which time is not really specified), he is not to cut his hair (Num. 6:5). As mentioned before, the tie-in is the unshorn hair, which resembles an untrimmed bush, is a crown on his head, which separates him from other men. Recall what Paul wrote to the Corinthians: **Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a shame to him** (I Cor. 11:14). A Nazirite was willing to endure this shame—this badge which set him apart from all else—as it signified his separation to God. The long hair was the overt symbol of the Nazirite's dedication to God.
 - d. He is to remain separated from the dead; a person who takes no pleasure of this earth, who is dedicated to God, is also not to come in contact which the result of being born into this world—death. This includes the funeral of his mother, father, sister or brother (Num. 6:6–7). Along with this, if he happens to be in contact with someone who suddenly dies, he is to go through a cleansing ritual, and then cut off all of his hair on the seventh day, the day he becomes clean unto God (Num. 6:7–12).
 - e. When the Nazirite chose to dedicate himself to God, there was a ceremony of offerings covered in Num. 6:13–20.
 - i. Once the vow of the Nazirite had been fulfilled, he brought three animals to the Sacred Tent to be sacrificed: (1) a one-year old, male lamb, without defect, for a burnt offering; (2) a year-old, ewe lamb without defect, for a sin offering; and, (3) a ram without blemish for a peace offering. All three of these represent the person and work of Jesus Christ. A burnt offering speaks of judgment; a sin offering speaks of that which our Lord endured on the cross—the punishment for our sins; and a peace offering represents the peace between God and man wrought by the work of Jesus Christ on the cross. The year old lambs are young adult lambs representing Jesus in his humanity, without spot or blemish, going to the cross without a reason. The ram speaks of the substitutionary aspect of His work upon the cross (it was a ram which was established from the very beginning times of the patriarchs as a substitutionary offering when it was offered rather than Isaac by Abraham).
 - ii. The next item was a basket of unleavened cakes of a fine flour mixed with oil. The flour represent the humanity of our Lord; the oil represents the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. The fact that it was unleavened means that it had not become corrupted with sin. Off the top of my head, I don't know what the grain offering was for.
 - iii. The priest, who represented man to God, offered these things up; you will note that the sacrifice is not done by the person for whom the sacrifice is for. In other words, even ceremonially, there were no works which we do—we do not offer up any sacrifice on behalf of ourselves before God.
 - iv. At the end of the sacrifices, the Nazirite cut off his unkempt hair and it was offered on the fire with the peace offering, which is the ram.
 - v. After all of these offerings, the Nazirite may drink wine. The last thing our Lord did upon the cross was to drink the GI-issued wine. **When Jesus therefore had received the sour wine, He said, "It is finished!" And He bowed His head and exhaled His breath** (John 19:30).
3. Samson, the Nazirite:
- a. Samson is the only person in Scripture who is clearly and unequivocally called a Nazirite to God (Judges 13:5). Samuel and John the Baptizer were possibly Nazirites; however, this is never stated directly.
 - b. Samson was to be a Nazirite all of his life (Judges 13:7).
 - c. Both Barnes and the NIV Study Bible mistakenly says that Samson's volition was not involved here. Au contraire, it is people like Samson who teach us the careful merging of man's free will and God's sovereignty. God sovereignly determined that Samson would be a Nazirite to God and this was stated in Judges 13:7; however, does this mean that Samson was a robot who did every bidding of God? As we study Samson further, it will be obvious that there were many times when Samson chose to go his own way. God's sovereign choice took into account Samson's free will. Samson accepted his destiny as a Nazirite to God. This was possibly a unique place in history (see the subsequent points about Christ Jesus, John the Baptizer and Samuel).
 - d. Although I seem to recall Thieme teaching that a Nazirite was to take a vow of celibacy as well, I find no evidence of that. In fact, quite to the contrary, we have Samson taking a wife of the Philistines (Judges 14:3) and that this choice was predetermined and approved by God (Judges 14:4).

- e. Samson had a definite purpose, and that was as a deliverer of Israel—to deliver Israel from the Philistines (Judges 13:5).
 - f. There is confusion over Samson and the cutting of his hair and the loss of his strength. The long hair was an overt symbol to all those who saw Samson that he was dedicated to God. It acted as sort of an overt sign as to whether Samson was controlled by the Holy Spirit or not. When fulfilling his Nazirite vows, Samson was filled with the Holy Spirit (or, indued with the power of the Holy Spirit). If any one of his vows were broken, then he lost this endowment for a period of time. When Delilah cut Samson's hair, he lost the Holy Spirit, as he is no longer keeping the Nazirite vows. However, when the hair grows back, it shows that he has returned to keeping the Nazirite vows and the Holy Spirit would sit upon him, giving him strength. In other words, his hair and his strength went hand-in-hand, just as the keeping of the Nazirite vows went hand-in-hand with the power of the Holy Spirit. Let's see if I can rephrase all of that: Samson's strength via the Holy Spirit did not depend upon the length of his hair, per se, but upon his vows as a Nazirite and his faithful observance of these vows.
 - g. Now, we do have one problem associated with Samson and his Nazirite vows, which I so far have been unable to reconcile: a Nazirite was not to come into contact with the dead and Samson killed a great many Philistines, therefore coming in contact with dead people all of the time. Keil and Delitzsch opinion on this: *The only other thing mentioned in the Mosaic law is the warning against defilement from contact with the dead, which does not seem to have been enforced in the case of Samson.*²
4. One of the great misconceptions is that some people think the Jesus Christ, in His humanity, was a Nazirite. Jesus was a Nazarene; i.e., a person from Nazareth. On the other hand, it is possible that John the Baptizer was a Nazirite. However, Samson, the Nazirite, may be thought of as an herald to the king of Israel, just as John the Baptizer was the herald to the true King of Israel..
 5. Interestingly enough, there are only two recorded case histories of Nazirites in Israel's: Samson and Samuel. We have Nazirites in the plural in Lam. 4:7: *Her [Israel's] Nazirites were purer than snow. They were whiter than milk; they were more ruddy boned than corals, their polishing like lapis lazuli.*³
 6. The last mention of the Nazirite is in Amos 2:11–12 where God is laying judgment upon Israel. He said, *"Then I raised up some of your sons to be prophets and some of your young men to be Nazirites. Is this not so, O sons of Israel?" declares Jehovah. "But you made the Nazirites drink wine and you commanded the prophets, saying, 'You will not prophesy!' "*
 7. Possible other Nazirites: John the Baptizer:
 - a. John the Baptizer is nowhere called a Nazirite. However, there were similarities between John and the Nazirite Samson.
 - b. His birth was similar to Samson's. His mother was barren and his parents, Zacharias, a priest, and Elizabeth, a daughter whose lineage went back to Aaron, were advanced in years. The angel of the Lord appeared to Zacharias and he was told that his wife would bear them a son (Luke 1:5–13).
 - c. Like a Nazirite, John would drink no wine or strong drink (Luke 1:15 7:33).
 - d. It is important to note that we cannot unequivocally conclude, because John had a trait in common with the Nazirites, that he was therefore a Nazirite.
 8. Possible Nazirites: Samuel. Samuel's mother promised if she would be given a son, she would dedicate him to God and a razor would not come upon his head (I Sam. 1:11). In the Greek of the same verse, it reads that he would drink no wine or strong drink as well.

² Keil & Delitzsch's *Commentary on the Old Testament*; ©1966 Hendrickson Publishers, Inc.; Vol. 2, p. 292.

³ I don't know that I am ready to explain that verse.