

Lesson 7 Acts 17-18-19 Handout - Nazarite

Nazarite from the Hebrew, “consecrated to God”

Briefly

The name given by the Hebrews to a person set apart and especially consecrated to the Lord. Although Nazarites are not unknown to early Hebrew history, the only specific reference to them in the Law is in Num. (6:1–21), a legal section of late origin, and embodying doubtless a codification of a long-standing usage. The regulations here laid down refer only to persons consecrating themselves to God for a specified time in virtue of a temporary vow, but there were also Nazarites for life, and there are even indications pointing to the consecration of children to that state by their parents. Nazirites who appear in the Bible include **Samson** (Judges 13:4–5), **Samuel** (1 Sam 1:11), **John the Baptist** (Luke 1:15), and possibly Saint **Paul** (Acts 18:18).¹ Although the Nazirite vow was usually temporary, the colorful story of Samson (Judg 13–16) is a famous instance of a lifelong Nazirite consecration: “No razor has touched my head, for I have been consecrated to God from my mother’s womb. If I am shaved, my strength will leave me, and I shall be as weak as any other man” (Judg 16:17). After Delilah tricked him and cut his hair, Samson did lose his strength, leading to his imprisonment and blinding by the Philistines, until his hair grew and God gave him strength for a final triumph over Israel’s enemies (Judg 16:28–30).

More in depth

According to the law in Num. (6:1–21) Nazarites might be of either sex. They were bound to abstain during the period of their consecration from wine and all intoxicating drink, and even from all products of the vineyard in any form. During the same period the hair must be allowed to grow as a mark of

¹ Hahn, S., ed. (2009). In [Catholic Bible Dictionary](#) (pp. 641–642). Doubleday.

holiness. The Nazarite was forbidden to approach any corpse, even that of his nearest relatives, under pain of defilement and consequent forfeiture of his consecration. If through accident he finds himself defiled by the presence of a corpse there were rituals that could make the person 'clean' again.

The existence of a class of perpetual Nazarites is known to us through occasional mention of them in the Old Testament writings, but these references are so few and vague that it is impossible to determine the origin of the institution or its specific regulations, which in some respects at least must have differed from those specified in Num. (6:1–21).

Nazarites appear in New Testament times, and reference is made to them for that period not only in the Gospel and Acts, but also in the works of Josephus (cf. "Ant. Jud.", XX, vi, 1, and "Bell. Jud.", II., xv, 1) and in the Talmud (cf. "Mishna", Nazir, iii, 6). Foremost among them is generally reckoned John the Baptist, of whom the angel announced that he should "drink no wine nor strong drink". He is not explicitly called a Nazarite, nor is there any mention of the unshaven hair, but the severe austerity of his life agrees with the supposed asceticism of the Nazarites. From Acts (21:23) we learn that the early Jewish Christians occasionally took the temporary Nazarite vow, and it is probable that the vow of St. Paul mentioned in Acts 18:18, was of a similar nature.²

² Driscoll, J. F. (1907–1913). [Nazarite](#). In C. G. Herbermann, E. A. Pace, C. B. Pallen, T. J. Shahan, & J. J. Wynne (Eds.), *The Catholic Encyclopedia: An International Work of Reference on the Constitution, Doctrine, Discipline, and History of the Catholic Church: Vols. I–XV*. The Encyclopedia Press; The Universal Knowledge Foundation.