

The Nazirite Vow and Fertility

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Abstract

Nazirites are a well-documented phenomenon within the context of the Hebrew Bible. The bulk of research has focused mainly on the role of Samson as a lifelong Nazirite, but little has been done concerning the role of women within the context of the Nazirite Vow. The goal of this paper will be to examine the role of women within the Nazirite Vow, as well as examining the constraints that might arise when one takes into account the purity laws.

The Nazirite Vow is the only vow within the Bible that explicitly mentions the inclusion of women. The question I am interested in addressing is, are there circumstances that might exclude the woman? The idea behind the Nazirite vow is that one is consecrating oneself to YHWH, or setting oneself apart. If one were setting oneself apart then these rules that they would have to follow would not supersede the purity laws. I would suggest that beyond the regular constraints, avoiding dead bodies, grape products, and cutting ones hair, one would still be responsible to keep the purity laws. Therefore, when one takes an issue like menstruation into account, this severely limits the amount of time a woman has to complete the Nazirite Vow. As I will detail in this paper, this leads to the conclusion that if the vow lasted for more than thirty days the only women who would be able to complete the Nazirite Vow successfully would be pregnant women or a woman who is postmenopausal. This could suggest a certain amount of restriction regarding the woman's ability to perform this vow and may suggest why the inclusion of women is so important within the context of

Numbers 6. Furthermore, this could suggest that fertility might be an aspect of the Nazirite Vow.

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While there are many people who deserve the blame for my continued studies I will abstain from direct acknowledgements because this is just the beginning of the journey. To those who have touched my life positively, in one way or the other, you will always have my deepest gratitude.

“The gods offer no rewards for intellect. There was never one yet that
showed any interest in it...” ~Mark Twain

Table of Contents

	Page
Abstract.....	i
Acknowledgements.....	iii
Chapter	
1. Introduction.....	1
2. The Traditional Interpretation of the Nazirite Vow in Numbers 6.....	3
3. The Nazirite Vow Outside of Numbers 6.....	8
4. Length of Vow.....	13
5. Nazirite: Set Apart from What?.....	18
6. Nazirites and Purity.....	20
7. Women who could take the Nazirite Vow.....	23
8. Nature of Vows and Vowing.....	25
9. The Nazirite Vow as Fertility Ritual.....	33
10. Conclusion.....	34
Works Cited.....	35

1. Introduction

The first twenty one verses of Numbers 6 is dedicated to the prescriptions of the Nazirite Vow, but historically the focus of biblical scholarship has been upon the final six verses which contains the “priestly blessing.” The Nazirite Vow plays a larger role within the Samson Cycle, but is often overshadowed by the relationship between Samson and Delilah, Samson’s superhuman strength, and/or the complexity of the character of Samson. The Nazirite Vow also plays a role in the birth narrative of Samuel which, yet again, disappears into obscurity playing no role in the rest of the Samuel storyline.

Similarly the role of women has been downplayed in a similar way within the world of Nazirite scholarship. There are plenty of books and articles dissecting the nature of this vow, especially the concept of the laity temporarily assuming equal sanctified footing with the priesthood. What has, for the most part been brushed aside, within the context of the Nazirite Vow, is the role of women. The Nazirite Vow, in Numbers 6, is the only example of a vow within the Hebrew Bible that specifically includes women.¹ Yet a very limited amount of work has been published regarding this strange occurrence. Why should women be mentioned specifically within the Nazirite Vow?

If one takes the purity laws that are laid out in Leviticus into account then there would be a very limited timeline in which a woman could undertake the Nazirite Vow, with one exception, pregnancy. If this is the case, than a possible aspect of the Nazirite Vow could be a fertility ritual. Some issues that must first be

¹ In the following passages each time the word נָזִיר is used it refers to men. Leviticus 7:16, Lev. 22:18-22, Lev. 27:2, Deut. 12:11-19, Deut. 23:23, Numbers 15:8, Numbers 30:2 The exception of to this rule would be Numbers 30:5-14 which is concerned with a vow that a woman undertake.

answered relate to time and intention; there is no prescribed timeline for which one performs the vow, so what kind of timeline would the Nazirite Vow follow? What does a vow entail? This paper will argue the very nature of vows within the Hebrew Bible. A vow is not simply something intended to purify or sanctify oneself, but it is meant to be a formal contract between deity and participant. Finally, within this framework, this paper will attempt to understand what might be at stake concerning a female Nazir, and by addressing these issues this paper will attempt to outline the ideal conditions for the Nazirite Vow, specifically concerning the role of the female Nazir.

2. The Traditional Interpretation of the Nazirite Vow in Numbers 6

The Nazirite Vow is comprised of three specific prohibitions, the first being they shall separate themselves from wine and strong drink; they shall drink no wine vinegar or other vinegar, and shall not drink any grape juice or eat grapes, fresh or dried. All their days as Nazirite they shall eat nothing that is produced by the grapevine not even the seeds or the skins. (Numbers 6:3-4)²

The next prohibition is “All the days of their Nazirite Vow no razor shall come upon their head; until the time is completed for which they separate themselves to the LORD, they shall be holy; they shall let the locks on their heads grow long.”

(Numbers 6:5) And finally there is a prohibition against corpse contamination.

“All the days that they separate themselves to the LORD they shall not go near a corpse. Even if their father or mother, brother or sister, should die, may not defile themselves; because their consecration to God is upon the head.” (Numbers 6:6-7)

Each prohibition carries a fair amount of significance so it would be beneficial for the sake of this paper to analyze them somewhat in depth. I had alluded earlier to an interest, on the part of Nazirite scholars, to focus on the concept of the laity temporarily assuming equal sanctified footing with the priesthood. The similarity between Numbers 6:3-4 and Leviticus 10:8-9 lends credibility to this argument.³ Leviticus 10:8-9 says “And the LORD spoke to

² All Biblical quotations will be from the NRSV unless otherwise noted.

³ There is some debate over whether this section in Leviticus belongs to P or H. Saul Olyan in his book, *Rites and Rank*, argues that Leviticus 8-11 is part of the Holiness School. Jacob Milgrom, in his *Leviticus commentary*, counters this argument by showing the split between the prohibition of alcohol in Ezekiel 44:21 and the instruction to teach the difference between sacred and common in Ezekiel 44:23. “Ezekiel knew this verse and the next (vv10-11) as a discrete injunction, unconnected with the previous wine prohibition.” (Milgrom pg. 615) While Leviticus 1-16 is largely composed of P, so for the sake of this paper I will be arguing for continuity between authors. For more information regarding this argument

Aaron: Drink no wine or strong drink, neither you nor your sons, when you enter the tent of meeting, that you may not die; it is a statute forever throughout your generations.” Susan Niditch suggests that the restriction of drinking wine, or strong drink, plays a two part role.

The prohibition against drinking before engaging in his activities mediating between God and Israel has to do with the need for presence of mind and sobriety in undertaking sacrificial duties, but also, within the symbol system as described by the writer of Leviticus 10, is framed by the need to ‘distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and clean.’⁴

Seemingly, it would be quite within the realm of reason to suggest that the prohibition of alcohol in Numbers 6 is so similar to Leviticus 10:8-9 that there is an element of priestly sanctification going on within the Nazirite Vow.

Another possible link to the prohibition of alcohol would be the example of the Rechabites who YHWH uses as an example in Jeremiah 35 for the people of Israel in regards to obeying what one is told. Because of their adherence to their ancestors vow, “Jonadab son of Rechab shall not lack a descendant to stand before me for all time.” (Jeremiah 35:19) While people have argued for this as a possible influence I would suggest that there is not enough evidence to make a definitive connection. The only link between the Nazir and the Rechabites is the prohibition against wine. The Rechabites also follow a mandate to live a Bedouin lifestyle having been ordered by Rechab to never “build a house, or sow seed; nor shall you

please consult Saul Olyan, “Rites and Rank” (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000) as well as Jacob Milgrom “Leviticus 1-16” (New York: Doubleday, 1991)

⁴ Susan Niditch *My Brother Esau is a Hairy Man: Hair and Identity in Ancient Israel*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008) pg. 87

plant a vineyard or even own one; but you shall live in tents all your days...”

(Jeremiah 35:7) There is more dissimilarity between traditions than similarity. It would seem clear that the prohibition of alcohol in Numbers 6 can be linked directly to the priesthood.

If one was to focus on Leviticus 10 another link might pop up between this text and the Nazirite Vow. Jim Getz points to a link in the language,

This phrase is similar to *שעשוע גדל* “the hair of one’s head growing loose” in Num 6:5. A similar phrase is found likewise in Lev 10:6 where Aaron and his sons Eleazar and Ithamar are told by Moses *תקשעו אל שאשיכם* “do not loose [the hair] of your heads, nor rend your clothes” after the death of Nadab and Abihu.⁵

Getz suggests that these actions of mourning in Leviticus 10 would be seen as problematic because of their proximity to a corpse. This seems to make sense, but I would suggest that there might be something different going on here.

Numbers 6:5 says, “...no razor shall come upon his head; until the time is completed for which they separate themselves to the LORD, they shall be holy...” Leviticus 21:5-6 says, regarding priests, “They shall not make bald spots upon their heads...They shall be holy to their God.” This is in regards to priests as a whole, and one of the rules is that they should not make bald spots on their head because it would diminish their holiness to God. Within the same vein the Nazirite is not to shave their head while enacting their vow due to them being holy to YHWH.

When isolating the account in Leviticus 10:1-11 one might notice that there is no discussion of corpse contamination, in verse 6 Moses instead warns Aaron and

⁵ Jim Getz “Limited Engagement with the Divine” (PhD. Diss., Brandeis University, 2011) pg. 181-182

Aaron's sons to not dishevel their hair or rend their clothing or they will die. Moses continues saying in verse 7 "You shall not go outside the entrance of the tent of meeting, or you will die". Within these two verses Moses warns his brother and nephews that their death would be imminent should they, dishevel their hair, rend their garments, or leave the tent of meeting. While this could be referring to mourning and specifically corpse contamination, it appears that issue that is at play within this story is a protocol for priests. They would be responsible for sacrifices when needed, and if they were to cut their hair they would no longer be "holy to their God." This is the critical role that they had to play in Israelite society; to defile themselves in any way could potentially harm Israel's relationship with YHWH. While corpse contamination might play a factor in these events, it is much simpler to not substitute later statutes and examine solely what is found within the text.

The final prohibition is something that had crept into the discussion about hair, and that is corpse contamination. Under no circumstance would a Nazir be allowed to go near a dead body, verse 9 says that even if someone should suddenly die nearby you are still contaminated. A Nazir is not even permitted to go near the corpse of a close relative who had recently passed because it would defile the "consecrated head." Once again I would like to agree with other scholars in arguing that certain prohibitions mirror the priesthood, and corpse contamination is not an exception.

In abstaining from being near a corpse, "the Nazirite resembles the High Priest, who is also forbidden to contaminate himself by attending the burial rites of

the members of his immediate family (Lev. 21:11).”⁶ Chapter 21 of Leviticus is very interesting because of its mirroring of Leviticus 10. Leviticus 10:5-6 has three specific prohibitions, “Do not dishevel your hair, and do not tear your vestments... You shall not go outside the entrance of the tent of meeting.” Leviticus 21:10-12 has four; the high priest “shall not dishevel his hair, nor tear his vestments. He shall not go where there is a dead body; he shall not defile himself even for his father and mother. He shall not go outside the sanctuary...” It is difficult to say when this idea of avoiding corpses came into play. It does not appear within the P strand of Leviticus, but does appear in H. Numbers 6, however, is identified as P so while this idea does not appear in what is identified as P in Leviticus it is found in the P strand. Regardless of the time span, this idea of corpse contamination eventually made its way into the Nazirite Vow, and it seems to be reflective of the restrictions placed upon the high priest.

⁶Jacob Milgrom, “The JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers” (Philadelphia, Jewish Publication Society. 1990) pg. 45 also see Niditch pg. 86. Saul Olyan suggests that these temporary links to priesthood actually reinforced the sanctity of the priestly class. “The very presence of the Nazirite is a reminder that even the elite among non-priests, those willing to embrace restrictive lifestyle modifications, have no enduring claim to holiness as do priests.” Saul Olyan. *Rites and Rank* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton Press, 2000) pg. 61

3. The Nazirite Vow Outside of Numbers 6

Nazirites are found only three other times within the Hebrew Bible (Judges 13:5, 7 and 16:17, 1 Samuel 1:11, 22, and Amos 2:11-12). If there is validity to the theory that the Nazirite Vow in Numbers is a later appropriation by the priestly authors then a look at these three other examples might shed light onto the “original” Nazirite.⁷ What elements of the Nazirite Vow might have been added or removed from these earlier accounts.

In Judges 11:4-5 when the angel is talking to Manoah’s wife it says, “Now be careful not to drink wine or strong drink, or to eat anything unclean, for you shall conceive and bear a son. No razor is to come on his head, for the boy shall be a Nazirite to God from birth. It is he who shall begin to deliver Israel from the hand of the Philistines.” The interpretation of this section could be potentially problematic. I say this because while there appears to be three prohibitions listed here, only one is a prohibition for Samson; the other two are for Manoah’s wife. Manoah’s wife is prohibited from drinking wine or strong drink; she too is not allowed to eat anything unclean. The only directive concerning Samson is that “no razor is to come on his head.” This is not to say that drinking wine or the Noahide laws might not have applied to Samson’s vow, but if we are dealing explicitly with the text this is the only rule that can be found.

The Samson Cycle is difficult because it is unclear the extent to which the Nazirite Vow may have initially played in the cycle. Is the Nazirite Vow simply a later addition to an ancient tale? For the sake of this article I will not delve into this

⁷ Martin Noth, “OTL Commentary: Numbers” (Kent, England: W. & J. Mackay & CO LTD. 1968) pg. 54 Noth argues that the Nazirite vow in numbers 6 is something that has been appropriated by the Priests in Numbers 6 whereas Samson and Samuel reflect the “original” Nazirite.

argument, regardless of whether or not the Nazirite Vow was original to the story, it is in the version that has lived on. If it is a redaction it does not matter because the finalized version does allow for the Nazirite Vow to play its part. What can be concluded from reading the Samson Cycle as a whole is the auspicious absence of one very important prohibition.

The Samson Cycle refers explicitly to the cutting of hair, or the lack there of, it hints at issues of corpse contamination, but there is at best a hint of the prohibition against wine or strong drink. The issue of hair is raised twice, the first is the prohibition given to Manoah's wife which has been discussed, and the other is in Judges 16:17-20 where Samson's hair is cut and "The LORD had left him". These seem to be fairly self explanatory. The only explicit prohibition is the cutting of Samson's hair which results in him losing his strength and the assistance of YHWH. The discussion of dietary restrictions is not as explicit but still has its moment. In Judges 14: 5-6 Samson is walking past a vineyard and encounters a lion. "The spirit of the LORD rushed on him, and he tore the lion apart barehanded as one might tear apart a kid. But he did not tell his father or his mother what he had done." The need for secrecy could suggest that Samson is aware that he is not allowed near a corpse, this will not be the last time Samson keeps the truth from his parents.

He later goes back to look at the lion corpse and sees that there is a swarm of bees inside who have formed a honey comb. He then "scraped it out into his hands, and went on, eating as he went. When he came to his father and mother, he gave some to them, and they ate it. But he did not tell them that he had taken the honey

from the carcass of the lion.” (Judges 14:9) K. Lawson Younger in her notes on Judges says that this is “A flagrant violation of his Nazirite status and a careless defiling of his parents.”⁸ While the going near a corpse might be a flagrant violation, the text might also be suggesting that the breaking of the dietary laws might also be problematic in regards to the vow.

Finally there is the prohibition of wine and strong drink. This issue does not seem to creep up in the Samson Cycle. One could argue that there is tacit disapproval of drink/grape products. The first example would be when Samson comes to the vineyard. The text might be suggesting that it is more than just coincidence that Samson happens to come to a vineyard and is immediately attacked by a lion. This is not the strongest argument when one considers that the spirit of the LORD then rushes upon him and he tears the lion limb from limb, but there might be some legitimacy to it. The second occurrence would be the “wedding feast.” This wedding feast might be better translated as a drinking feast, a biblical kegger if you will. The word הַשְּׂמֵרָה can best be translated this way, the BDB defines it as a “feast; drinking (occasion for drinking, drinking-bout).” After this event Samson asks his famous riddle which ultimately leads to his embarrassment. This could be evidence that Samson is being punished for his drinking, but pails in overtness in comparison to the cutting of his hair.

What is overt is the prohibition placed on drinking given to Manoah’s wife. If one was to understand Manoah’s wife as a temporary Nazir then the prohibition is

⁸ Ed. Michael D. Coogan “The New Oxford Annotated Bible” 3rd Edition (Korea: Oxford University Press, 2007) pg.378 note 8-9

made quite clearly. For whatever reason Manoah's wife's temporary Nazirite Vow has not been developed in biblical scholarship, but it is key to this theory.

Regardless of how you read the Samson Cycle, it is undeniable that the most prominent aspect of the Nazirite Vow is hair. It is the source of Samson's strength and the loss of it is what causes YHWH to abandon him. While there may be references, possibly overt, to the other prohibitions, hair is overwhelmingly the center of attention within the Samson story.

This section has focused, for the most part, on Samson because there is so much within the Samson Cycle that can be discussed in regards to the Nazirite Vow. There is not as much in 1 Samuel and Amos but they can provide insight into what restrictions may be more original than others. In the birth narrative of Samuel, Hannah says, "I will set him before you as a Nazirite until the day of his death. He shall drink neither wine nor intoxicants, and no razor shall touch his head."⁹ (1 Samuel 1:11) So, quite clearly, there is a prohibition against alcohol and hair cutting within Samuel. There is no prohibition against being around a dead body. The rest of Samuel's life does not reference the Nazirite Vow but, in fairness, it does not reference Samuel drinking or cutting his hair either; however there is interaction with a corpse. In 1 Samuel 15:33 "Samuel hewed Agag in pieces before the LORD in Gilgal." Samuel does nothing to hide this act, unlike Samson who is secretive after killing a lion, which could suggest that there is no prohibition regarding dead bodies for Nazirites in the story of Samuel.

⁹There is no suggestion of Samuel being a Nazirite in the MT but it does appear in other accounts such as the LXX and the Dead Sea scrolls. The MT does make mention of Samuel being given to YHWH and no razor shall touch his head. Even if it is not made explicit in the MT this text does appear to suggest that Samuel, at least for the purposes of his birth narrative, was a Nazirite.

Amos, on the other hand, carries only one prohibition and that is against strong drink. “And I raised up some of your children to be prophets and some of your youths to be Nazirites. Is it not indeed so, O people of Israel? says the LORD. But you made the Nazirites drink wine...” (Amos 2:11) There is nothing about hair or corpse contamination but it is only discussing what the people of Israel made the Nazirites do. There is no discussion of hair or dead bodies, but there is no rejection of the motif either. Amos is helpful in exhibiting the prohibition on wine for Nazirites but does not signal any other prohibitions or the lack thereof.

With this evidence found in Amos one can conclude that Alcohol might have been an “original” inclusion. Within the same vein one could also conclude, based upon Samson, that avoiding dead bodies might be an “original” inclusion. The evidence for both of these is not overly convincing, but still plausible. The one prohibition that seems to have the most legitimacy is hair.

4. Length of Vow

Establishing a timeframe for the Nazirite Vow is difficult due to the ambiguity of the text. In Numbers 6 there are six separate verses alluding to the time in which the Nazirite will complete their vow (Numbers 6:4,5,6,8,12, and 13). Each instance contains vague phrases such as “all their days as Nazirites”, “all the days of their Nazirite Vow”, “all the days that they separate themselves”, etc. There are plenty of references to general time frames, but the only specific reference is in regards to purifying oneself after coming into contact with a corpse. So can one construct a time frame for the vow from beginning to end? Could this vow be only a number of days, or months, or years? The one element that is dismissible is the idea of a maximum amount of time for the vow. Samson and Samuel, who are lifelong Nazirites prove that, in some cases, there can be no set maximum for the Nazirite Vow. Based upon evidence within the text there is a way to construct a framework that will establish a minimum amount of days. This begins with the one prohibition that seems to be central to the Nazirite Vow and that is hair.

The significance of growing out ones hair cannot be overstated; this alone is the one link to the lifelong Nazirite. The only shared restriction between Samuel and Samson is not cutting their hair (Judges 16:17, 1Samuel 1:11). This seems to be the unique aspect of the Nazirite Vow, as understood to an Israel familiar with Numbers 6, and one that carries a great amount of significance. “That the Nazirite’s uncut hair is more significant than his other two characteristics is indicated in verse 7; it is the sole reason cited for abstaining from corpse contamination. Also it is the only characteristic in common to both the temporary Nazirite...and the lifelong

Nazirite.”¹⁰ While there is a lack of textual information concerning aspects of the vow, the hair is what is consecrated to YHWH and therefore it is the hair that plays the greatest role in the completion of the vow.¹¹ “Without a doubt, the most distinctive feature of the rites of the Nazir is the disposition of the Nazir’s hair...The emphasis on hair recalls the career of Samson.”¹² While Niditch does not go as far in stressing the importance of hair, she does make an important comment in relation to time. She says that, “He or she grows hair, presumably so that it shows.”¹³

If the hair had to grow so that it showed then it would seem to follow that a long period of time was necessary. Numbers 6:5 has undoubtedly confused some in its wording. Translations seem to disagree about what is actually said, the NRSV translates the end of the verse as, “they shall let the locks of the head grow long.” The JPS translates it as, “the hair of his head being left to grow untrimmed.” Levine translates it as, “he is to remain sacred, allowing the hair on his head to grow loose.”¹⁴ This ambiguity that lends itself to the text makes it difficult to analyze. If it indeed is meant to grow long then it would have been noticeable. The hair growing loose or untrimmed could simply mean that the hair is generally disheveled which would also set one apart, because loose or untrimmed hair would cause a separation from the priests. “The uncut hair of the Nazirite is truly his distinction...In this respect, he differed from the priest, who, though forbidden to

¹⁰ Milgrom pg. 45

¹¹ It is not my desire to negate the importance of the other parts of the ritual, it is merely to point out significance hair plays in every account of the Nazirite Vow in the Bible, where other aspects remain undiscussed in the case of Samuel and Samson especially.

¹² Baruch Levine “The Anchor Bible: Numbers 1-20” (New York: Doubleday, 1993) pg. 215

¹³ Niditch pg.82

¹⁴ Levine pg. 216 Jeremy Schipper suggested that it translates as to grow very great. Be aware that Levine’s translation is somewhat questionable but acceptable because it is related to the JPS translation.

shave his hair was compelled to trim it (Ezek. 44:20).”¹⁵ If the hair was disheveled then the vow did not need to take that long, but noticeable change in length would have taken much longer, especially for someone who already has long hair.

There are examples outside of the Hebrew Bible that give us a little clarity on length. The Mishnah states that “A Nazirite-vow unspecified as to length is for thirty days. If one said, Lo, I shall be a Nazir for one long spell, or, for one short spell, it is for thirty days.”¹⁶ The part that stands out is that a short spell is still specified as thirty days. While this entry in the Mishnah might not be from the period it claims, this passage seems to have made an impact on Milgrom because he says, “The popularity of the Nazirite Vow at the close of the Second Temple period can be explained by the relative ease in fulfilling it. By then the rabbis had reduced the term to thirty days.”¹⁷

Some would argue that the Nazirite Vow could have been as short as seven days based upon Acts. I would argue that the author of Acts was unfamiliar with the Nazirite Vow which lead to an incorrect depiction of the events. Scholars often point to the story in Acts 21 of Paul paying for the four Nazirites to have their heads shaved and the seven days that it takes, but I would argue for a misinterpretation of Numbers 6. “Then Paul took the men, and the next day, having purified himself, he entered the temple with them, making public the completion of the days of purification when the sacrifice would be made for each of them. When the seven days were almost completed...” (Acts 21:26-27) This seems to be mirroring

¹⁵ Milgrom pg. 356

¹⁶ Mish. Naz. 1:3 as found in *A History of the Mishnaic Law of Women: Part Five the Mishnaic System of Women*. Ed. Jacob Neusner vol. 5 (Leiden, Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1980)

¹⁷ Milgrom pg. 358

Numbers 6:9, “If someone dies very suddenly nearby, defiling the consecrated head, then they shall shave the head on the day of their cleansing; on the seventh day they shall shave it.” Further evidence within Acts suggests a general lack of understanding when it came to the Nazirite Vow. “After staying there for a considerable time, Paul said farewell to the believers and sailed for Syria, accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila. At Cenchreae he had his hair cut, for he was under a vow.” (Acts 18:18) According to Halakic law one must perform the closing of the Nazirite Vow in Jerusalem, one could not simply sacrifice where one pleased.

There is an example of this occurring during the Diaspora. “There is the story of Queen *Helena of Adiabene who fulfilled a vow that if her son returned safely from war, she would take a Nazirite Vow for seven years.”¹⁸ She took the vow upon his safe return only to be informed that she could not have legitimately completed the vow because one can only complete the Nazirite Vow in Jerusalem. Due to the discrepancies between the story in Acts and Jewish law I would suggest that the seven days figure, quoted in Acts, is at best confused.

So time might be a drawback to taking the Nazirite Vow, especially if Milgrom’s conclusion is correct and the rabbis had indeed reduced the amount of days necessary to complete the vow as late as the end of the Second Temple period. There is no sure way to conclude any minimum amount of days for the Nazirite Vow, but at the very least there seems to be some understanding that in the Second Temple period it would have been an absolute minimum of thirty days. Issues of

¹⁸ Encyclopaedia Judaica. Ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik. Vol. 15. 2nd ed. (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007) pg. 44

prohibition and timelines have been discussed but there is still one big question,
how exactly are Nazirites set apart?

5. Nazirite: Set Apart from What?

What exactly is a Nazir set apart from? One aspect being that the Nazir is separated from society. This conclusion is drawn from the ban on wine and other grape products. This would limit one's ability to attend festivals and parties where wine would surely be served. "Together with bread, wine connotes social participation in the meal, with frequent implications of joy, sharing, and gladness."¹⁹ The abstaining from wine is the same as abstaining from society. This social removal is one aspect of how a Nazir might be set apart.

The prohibition of wine as well as grape products might be a sacrifice beyond social parameters. As Baruch Levine points out, "Raisins...forbidden to the Nazirite, are a mainstay of the Middle Eastern diet (cf. 1 Samuel 25:18, 30:12. 2 Sam 16:1)."²⁰ So this dietary restriction is more problematic than a removed observer might consider. This restriction of grapes and grape products leads to a rather large reduction in the Nazir's quality of living. Beyond the issues of food, there are also problems that arise from not being able to drink wine.

"We are told that, when travelling, Hebrews invariably took wine along. This last detail may be due to the literary nature of scripture; but it may also reflect the fact that water stored in skins or jars is easily tainted, thus turning unpleasant to the palate."²¹

This leads Sasson to the conclusion that wine, not water, would have been the drink of choice in Ancient Israel. If this conclusion is justified then the Nazir would be

¹⁹ Niditch pg. 72

²⁰ Levine pg. 220

²¹ J.M. Sasson, *Drinking in Ancient Societies: History and Culture of Drinks in the Ancient Near East*. Lucio Milano. Padova: Grafiche TPM s.r.l., 1994. pg. 402

giving up much more than a social drink, they would be giving up an everyday necessity. This could lead to potential problems due to drinking contaminated water, or having to rely on some other form of drink such as milk. The vow of the Nazir is not to simply set themselves apart from social engagements, but to add to their own burden of living to some extent.

Another possible aspect of the Nazirite Vow is to gain a potential spiritual notoriety for themselves. When one is performing the Nazirite Vow it is likely that it would not go unnoticed. This falls in line with Catherine Bells description of fasting rituals “In these rituals people are particularly concerned to express publicly—to themselves, each other, and sometimes outsiders—their commitment and adherence to basic religious values.”²² So through these sacrifices socially, personally, and spiritually the Nazir is able to make their fellow spiritual congregants aware of their own spiritual fervor.

²² Catherine Bell “Ritual” (New York, Oxford University Press: 1997) pg. 120

6. Nazirites and Purity

While it seems evident that one is setting themselves apart from society and certain creature comforts, they cannot be setting themselves apart from the Law. Discussions of the Nazirite Vow rarely incorporate the purity laws, but wouldn't they apply to someone who is making themselves holy in the eyes of YHWH? The problem is if one is holy in the eyes of YHWH, if this person is consecrating themselves to God, then they would have to be adherents to the purity laws as well, would they not?

It is evident in Numbers 6:9 that it is necessary for the Nazir to adhere to the purity laws. "If someone dies very suddenly nearby, defiling the consecrated head, then they shall shave their head on the day of cleansing; on the seventh day they shall shave their head." This is in agreement with cleansing from Numbers 19:14, which says that anyone who is in a tent when someone dies will be unclean for a period of seven days. There is the issue that death is specified within the Nazirite Vow so cleanliness laws would have nothing to do with it, and this is a legitimate claim. I would counter that this vow suggests, "Nazirites they are holy to the Lord." (Numbers 6:8) One cannot be unclean and sacrifice to YHWH, so how could someone be unclean during any point during a vow that culminates in the sacrifice of consecrated hair? Being unclean in any way, shape, or form leads to the sanctity of ones head being compromised.

Susan Niditch in *My Brother Esau is a Hairy Man* writes about this very topic when discussing the lifelong Nazir Samson.

“Equally interesting in a positional analysis is the lack of reference to unclean food in Numbers 6, a prohibition clearly found in Judges 13.

Keeping kosher for the author of Numbers is a critical pan-Israelite means of self-definition, so basic that it need not be mentioned; it is assumed by the late priestly writers as customary for all Israelites.”²³

While Niditch is assuming certain truths in the priestly writing of Numbers, these assumptions are within reason. The priestly source would have no need to include dietary and cleanliness laws that were already held as the indisputable law of YHWH.

To be “set apart” does not suggest set apart from the law; instead it suggests that one goes above and beyond what they are called to do under the law. If this is indeed the case and ritual purity plays a factor in the execution of the Nazirite Vow then this could immediately become even more restrictive and potentially more problematic to complete. If Niditch is correct to assume that the dietary laws would have been considered common knowledge would it not also make sense to suggest that the purity laws could fall into the same category. While there are a multitude of purity laws there is one that I would like to focus on for the sake of this paper.

One relatively unavoidable purity issue is menstruation. “When a woman has a discharge of blood that is her regular discharge from her body, she shall be in her impurity for seven days, and whoever touches her shall be unclean until the evening.”²⁴ (Leviticus 15:19) This would be, assuming that women regularly

²³ Niditch pg. 88

²⁴ For a discussion on the length of menstrual impurity and the reasoning, you might want to consult Tarja S. Philip “Menstruation and Childbirth in the Bible: Fertility and Impurity” (New York: Peter Lang Publishin, 2006) Also Jacob Milgrom “Anchor Bible Leviticus 1-16” (New York: Doubleday, 1991) pg. 934-937, 948-953

menstruated, extraordinarily problematic for any woman who was to undertake the Nazirite Vow. If, as argued earlier, the minimum for the Nazirite Vow would have been thirty days, then very few women would be able to undergo the Nazirite Vow. So, what types of women could undertake the Nazirite Vow?

7. Women who could take the Nazirite Vow

There are three phases in an average woman's life in which she might be able to undertake the Nazirite Vow. Granted this would still be dependent upon support from the male head of the household. Numbers 30 outline the problem of a woman undertaking a vow. If the woman still lives in her father's house, he reserves the right to cancel the vow. A husband would reserve the same right, but a divorced woman or a widow is free to do as she pleases.

The first phase that would be possible is a woman who has yet to reach puberty. Anyone who is pre-menstrual would not have to worry about menstruating and that would be one major impurity bullet that a little girl could dodge. It does raise the question of ritual involvement though. A woman that young might not be allowed to be involved in any kind of ritual activities. She would also have to depend upon her father to pay for the sacrifices so she would need more support than just an ok from her father.

Another phase that a woman could hypothetically take the Nazirite Vow without issues of menstrual impurity would be a post-menopausal woman. She, like the pre-menstrual child would not have to worry about menstruating and would be able to complete the vow. As is most likely the case with Helena of Adiabene. Presumably, with the death rates of ancient Israel, a woman in this position probably would not have a man standing in her way, and women were able to own property so it is also possible that she could take the vow.

The third phase that would be possible is pregnancy. During the time a woman is pregnant she is ritually pure, after copulation at least, and could

potentially remain so until she gives birth. While yet again there would be the issue of her husband being able to cancel her vow, it is hypothetically possible. It is this pregnant woman that will be the focus of further dissection in this paper. Before that, it might be worthwhile to delve into the nature of vows in the Bible before trying to conceive of what a female Nazirite Vow might be like.

8. Nature of Vows and Vowing

Vows, or vowing, are not infrequent in the Hebrew Bible, but they seem to be universal in their motivation. Whenever someone makes a vow in the Hebrew Bible there is an if...then relationship being imposed.²⁵ These vows are purely conditional, structured as “If you give me what I want I will worship you,” or the less bold “I will do this so please give me that.”

There are different elements to these vows whether they are for victory in war, protection, or fertility. Jacob vows to YHWH in Genesis 28:20-22 that

If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house; and of all that you give me I will surely give one tenth to you.

This is a basic vow of protection; unsurprisingly an I will scratch your back if you scratch mine dialogue. Jacob is looking out for himself in this deal, without any notion of setting himself apart or dedicating himself to God. The basic notion behind Jacob’s vow is to protect himself. While God will get something out of this relationship, one tenth of Jacob’s successes to be exact, the bulk of the reward falls on the shoulders of Jacob.

Jephthah makes a relatively one sided vow as well in Judges 11:30-31 “And Jephthah made a vow to the LORD, and said, ‘If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, then whoever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return victorious from the Ammonites, shall be the LORD's, to be offered up by me

²⁵ Examples of this are Genesis 28:20, Numbers 21:2, Judges 11:30, 1 Samuel 1:11, and 2 Samuel 15:7-8

as a burnt offering.’” Jephthah makes this vow in order to curry YHWH’s favor, again demonstrating the conditional motivation behind vows and vow making.

Unfortunately for Jephthah it was his daughter that he was forced to sacrifice, but regardless of the consequences it is understandable why Jephthah would make this vow. He might have changed his mind or chosen better words had he known the outcome, but the motivations make sense from a rational perspective.

In his article, *Were Nazirite Vows Unconditional?*, Tony W. Cartledge argues that “A study of other biblical vows reveals that vows in the Hebrew Scriptures are uniformly portrayed as *conditional* arrangements with God. Despite the fact that they are always made in the context of prayer, they have the character of a bargain.”²⁶ This is unarguably the case of Hannah in 1 Samuel 1, Hannah has been unable to conceive and is tormented by her husband Elkanah’s other wife and is desperate for a child.

She was deeply distressed and prayed to the LORD, and wept bitterly. She made this vow: "O LORD of hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a male child, then I will set him before you as a Nazirite until the day of his death. He shall drink neither wine nor intoxicants, and no razor shall touch his head." (1 Samuel 1:11)

In a community where progeny is the most important element for survival it is unsurprising to come across a vow of this nature. “Ancient Israel was a society with severe problems maintaining population levels, since lifespans were short and mortality rates were high. Thus, the society needed high birthrates in order to

²⁶ Tony W. Cartledge “Were Nazirite Vows Unconditional?” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 51, no.3 (July 1, 1989) pg. 415

survive.”²⁷ According to David Carr in *The Erotic Word* women died ten years earlier, on average than men, the average age span was between 25 and 35. “Within this context, every fertile woman needed to produce more than five live births during her adult life in order for the next generation to take the current generation’s place.”²⁸ These figures show, relatively clearly, that progeny is the key to keeping the clan strong and therefore this kind of an arrangement with YHWH makes perfect sense.

So why is it that so few have argued for a motivation behind the Nazirite Vow? If every other occurrence of vow making results in this conditional type of relationship, then why should the Nazirite Vow be any different. Granted the language of the Nazirite Vow is constructed so that the participant is considered consecrated and made holy to YHWH, but this does not fall in line with other elements of vow taking in the Hebrew Bible. So, what might a Nazirite be looking to receive in exchange for their vow?

²⁷ Jon L. Berquist “Controlling Corporeality: The Body and the Household in Ancient Israel” (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2002) pg. 62

²⁸ David M. Carr “The Erotic Word” (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003) pg. 49-50

9. The Nazirite Vow as Fertility Ritual

In Judges 16:31 the reader is informed for the first time that Samson has brothers, who come to assist in his burial. This is quite a turnaround for the wife of Manoah who was barren according to Judges 1 3:2. So the issue becomes, how did Manoah's wife become so fertile all of the sudden?

There are several examples of barrenness in the Hebrew Bible and those are found in the stories of Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Manoah's Wife, Hannah, and the Shunammite woman.²⁹ The focus of these stories usually revolves around a more religiously inspired reading of YHWH granting these women children. In the case of Sarah and Rachel scholars also reflect upon the interaction of these women with their sexual rivals, Hagar in Sarah's case and Leah in Rachel's. What happens when one is no longer barren, are they then able to continue to procreate?

The limited evidence within the Bible might suggest that continuing to have children is unlikely. Out of these four examples two have multiple pregnancies, and only one has more than two children. In Genesis 11 Sarah has Isaac and then has no more children. In Genesis 25 Rebekah, Isaac's wife, is also barren. She gives birth to twin boys, Jacob and Esau, and does not give birth to any other children. In Genesis 29 Rachel, Jacob's wife, becomes pregnant with Joseph after using some mandrakes and years later gives birth to Benjamin. In 2 Kings Elisha proclaims that a Shunammite woman, who is married to a very old man, will have a son and she does. There is no evidence of her having another child, but in fairness, her story is

²⁹ There is also the mention of Abimelech's wife and female slaves having their wombs opened after God had plagued them in Genesis 20. Because there is no great detail about these women they do not add to the text in the same way that the patriarchs wives as well as Manoah's wife and Hannah who all have a much larger amount of text dedicated to their plight.

very limited and she does not receive the same amount of attention as the women previously discussed. In Judges 13 Manoah's wife gives birth to Samson and in Judges 16:31 the text says that Samson has brothers. Due to the lack of mention of Manoah having any other wives or it is fair to conclude that these might also be the children of this unnamed woman. Finally, there is Hannah who gives birth to Samuel in 1 Samuel 1, and then she had an additional three sons and two daughters. So Manoah's wife and Hannah becoming so abundantly fertile, when this clearly seems to not be the case for our prior examples of barrenness, is puzzling.

Susan Ackerman attempts to address the issue of barrenness in her book *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen: Women in Judges and Biblical Israel*. She concludes that "The Bible's stories of its barren women are thus narratives in two acts. The first act climaxes with the birth of the promised child, and the second describes some way in which Yahweh exercises God's rightful claim upon the life of that child."³⁰ She presents her argument convincingly but she takes a lot for granted within this conclusion. She begins with the idea that this "first act" includes the arrival of the promised child, but there is no announcement for Joseph, God does open her womb, but there is no promise made on Rachel's behalf. As for YHWH exercising his claim upon the child's life, how does this work in the case of Esau or Isaac for that matter? Neither of these figures play a pivotal role in Genesis, Isaac is basically a transition between Abraham and Jacob, and Esau seemingly plays no role in YHWH's plan. I would argue that instead of a uniformity between barrenness stories each serves a specific purpose dependent upon the story. An

³⁰ Susan Ackerman "Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen: Women in Judges and Biblical Israel" (New York: Doubleday. 1998)pg. 192-193

overarching theme between the six might be attempting to find a link that is not present.

If an Israelite woman was “barren” then what would be a better method of becoming fertile than turning to YHWH? In this case by undergoing the rites of the Nazirite as well as offering your first offspring to YHWH one might be setting themselves up for future offspring. Working within the context of vows working as bargaining chips, then the Nazirite Vow and fertility seem to be willing bedfellows.

It is undeniable that women took the Nazirite Vow. In Judges, even though the vow is imposed upon Samson, his mother takes part in the vow throughout her pregnancy. Within the framework of ritual purity it is true that if a woman were pregnant that would increase her ability to undertake the Nazirite Vow. This would give her a maximum of nine months, assuming she undertook the vow directly after conceiving and subsequently purifying herself after the sexual act took place. This very well could be the case in regards to Samson’s mother.

In Judges 13:2-4 Manoah’s wife is introduced, she

was barren, having borne no children. And the angel of the LORD appeared to the woman and said to her, ‘Although you are barren, having borne no children, you shall conceive and bear a son. Now be careful not to drink wine or strong drink, or to eat anything unclean, for you shall conceive and bear a son.

These regulations that the angel has set for Manoah’s wife not only allude to the language of the Nazirite Vow, but include a warning to keep the dietary laws as well. Regardless of whether or not the Nazirite Vow is a later addition to the Samson Cycle this illustrates that these are elements within the Nazirite Vow and that, at the least, they were recognizable at the time of redaction.

An argument can be made that Manoah's wife undertook elements of the Nazirite Vow in her avoiding "wine or strong drink" but there is little suggestion in 1 Samuel Hannah might have undertaken a Nazirite Vow. While this is a fair point to raise, the language used in the back and forth between Eli and Hannah not only mirrors that of the angel and Manoah's wife, but the language of Numbers 6 as well. When Eli discovers Hannah praying in 1 Samuel 1:14-15 he says to her, "'How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine.' But Hannah answered, 'No, my lord, I am a woman deeply troubled; I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink...'" Working within the argument that a woman would promise to undertake this vow after intercourse, in order to conceive, then one could argue that Hannah is preparing herself for this vow.

Additionally, the phrase 'wine and beer' (יין ושכר) occurs in the MT at 1 Sam 1:15 where Hannah protests Eli's assumption that she is inebriated. This phrase also occurs in Numbers 6:3 and Judges 13:4, 7, 14. It is reasonable to see Hannah's vow in the MT, along with the reference to wine and beer as having provoked the variant. That is to say, the reference to hair, wine and beer in such close proximity in the MT led to the interpretive gloss that Samuel was a Nazirite.³¹

According to the BDB³² the word רכש occurs only once without being accompanied by יין, but the phrase "drink wine and strong drink" only occurs seven times in the Hebrew Bible.³³ The one appearance in Deuteronomy is referring to the lack of wine or strong drink in the desert, the other seven revolve around Nazirites

³¹ Getz pg.196-197

³² Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon

³³ Numbers 6:3, 1 Sam 1:15, Leviticus 10:9, Judges 13:4, Judges 13:7, Judges 13:14, Deuteronomy 29:4. Due to wording in Proverbs 31:4 I have chosen to exclude it. It translates, roughly, to "drink wine...or ask where is strong drink".

or priestly restrictions. This seems to suggest that this phrase “drink wine and strong” drink in a negative is reserved for discussions of priestly and Nazirite prohibitions. If this is the case, is it possible that Hannah might be preparing herself to undergo the Nazirite Vow herself?

In order for this concept to work one would have to bargain with YHWH that if they become pregnant they will undergo the rites of the Nazirite and, potentially, set their child apart. Hannah prays to God saying that she will set her potential offspring apart as a Nazirite if God will increase her fertility. When Eli questions Hanna if she has been drinking Hannah responds in 1 Samuel 1:15, “No, my lord, I am a woman deeply troubled; I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink”. If the mother of a lifelong Nazirite must also take on the role of the Nazirite as well, at least until birth, then Hannah seems to be preparing herself as well.

Both Hannah and Manoah’s wife receive a sudden burst of fertility after the birth of Samuel and Samson respectively. Hannah is reported to have had “three sons and two daughters.” (1 Samuel 2:21) After Samson, Manoah’s wife gives birth to multiple sons who are revealed in Judges 16:31 when they retrieve Samson’s body from the ruined temple. Based upon the earlier evidence it is fair to suggest that these are vastly different results for barren women, and the only link between them is the Nazirite Vow.

This seems to be one of the few examples in which a woman could undertake the Nazirite Vow while remaining ritually pure. If these women both undertook the Nazirite Vow after conceiving then they would remain ritually pure and the regulation of refraining from strong drink is something that both women seem to be

following. Both of these women, if following the precepts of the Nazirite Vow fall right into the pattern of other people who vow in the Bible. This is a formal contract being entered into with YHWH and in a society where the only way to survive is progeny this seems to be an amicable way to open a womb.

10. Conclusion

The goal of this paper is not to say specifically “this is what the Nazirite Vow is.” Instead this paper outlines a possible set of circumstances that would focus on the ability of a woman to perform the Nazirite Vow. Due to the patriarchal construction of Israelite society it is logical to conclude that there would be certain limitations for women within the Israelite cult and this paper attempts to work within those perceived constraints.

The evidence presented here seems to suggest a connection between fertility and the Nazirite Vow. Fertility would play the role of an aspect within the Nazirite Vow, not its sole function. Numbers states specifically that a woman could take the Nazirite Vow, and if Manoah’s wife and Hannah are any kind of example then you will not only have one child, like the women of Genesis, but you will become abundantly fertile. The Nazirite Vow is simply that, a vow. It is no different from any other vow in the Bible except it is more formulaic. So, if you were to take on a vow, why not turn to YHWH for children? This may explain why women are specifically mentioned in Numbers 6.

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