

BY BYRON LONGINO



# THE NAZIRITE VOW

**S**AMSON, A MIGHTY MAN of the Bible known for his great strength, fearsome fighting skills, and long hair, should also be known for a lifelong vow and the price he paid for breaking it. An angel of the Lord called Samson to a life as a “Nazirite,” an individual uniquely devoted to God.

## Parameters

One should not confuse the word “Nazirite” with “Nazarene,” the word that designates someone from Jesus’ hometown—although both derive from the same Hebrew root word.<sup>1</sup> Three related Hebrew terms reflect both similarities and nuances of meaning. The word “Nazirite” comes from the Hebrew term *nazir*

and refers to someone who demonstrates consecration, devotion, and separation.<sup>2</sup> *Nazar* is a term for separating or consecrating. Moses commanded Aaron and his sons to stay away (*nazar*) from the holy offerings that people had presented to the Lord (see Lev. 22:2). The Lord promised judgment on those in Israel who separated (*nazar*) themselves from God and turned to idols (Ezek. 14:7-8).<sup>3</sup> Yet another word, *nezer*, translated “consecrated” or “consecration,” describes in part “the period of separation or abstention that was part of the Nazirite vow (Num. 6:4-5,7-9,12-13,18-19,21).”<sup>4</sup> *Nezer* emphasizes the idea of someone or something separated or consecrated for a special purpose.

Numbers 6:1-21 is the only biblical passage that details the requirements of the Nazirite vow. The Hebrew phrase translated “makes a special vow” in Numbers 6:2 emphasizes the commitment of someone strongly devoted to God.<sup>5</sup> Making this Nazirite vow was not an occasional act of consecration. The vow marked the point at which the individual entered a state of total separation “to” the Lord, and also a state of separation “from” certain, normally permissible community practices and traditions. Women as well as men made Nazirite vows.

Two types of Nazirite vows existed—lifelong and limited. In the first, a parent made the vow or accepted the calling for a yet to be conceived child to be a Nazirite.<sup>6</sup> In the second, the individual



Remnant of an ancient winepress in the area of Zorah. In the foreground, the deeper part caught the grape juice. The upper part held the grapes while they were being pressed. A trench joins the two sections. An

angel appeared to Manoah's wife at Zorah and told her that although she had been barren, she would have a son. The angel instructed that she was not to "eat anything that comes from the grapevine or drink wine or beer. And

she must not eat anything unclean" (Judg. 13:14, HCSB). As Manoah and his wife later offered a burnt sacrifice, the angel ascended in the flame. When her son was born, she named him Samson. Samson grew up in Zorah.

made the vow for a limited period of time. This second type was the more common practice; it involved the person voluntarily submitting himself or herself and making the vow in person.

The Lord commanded Nazirites to abstain from three actions: (1) consuming wine and other grape-related products; (2) cutting their hair; and (3) touching the dead. The three areas of prohibition—diet, appearance, and associations—represented individual areas of life and served as a means to achieve separation and to remain totally devoted to God. The Nazirite regulations required the one under the vow to go beyond the dietary requirements of the Israelite culture in general. The uncut hair provided the visible sign of the Nazirite's state of consecration. All Israelites were to avoid contact with the dead unless the burial of a family member required contact. The person under a Nazirite vow could not even come into contact with a dead loved one (Num. 6:7).

For those who made the Nazirite vow for a limited time, two actions marked the conclusion of the dedicatory period. First, the participant

would cut his or her hair. This served as a visual notification of the vow's conclusion. Second, the person would offer gifts to God. These gifts were expensive and expressed the person's total commitment to the Lord during this period of ardent devotion (vv. 13-21).

### Participants

The Old Testament provides limited information concerning Nazirites. Amos 2:11-12 refers to some men God raised up to be Nazirites, men who endured defilement at the hands of Israelites who forced them to drink wine. Amos compared Nazirites with prophets and pronounced the diminished impact both were having in eighth-century Israel. His linking the prophets to the Nazirites emphasized the high regard and high

expectations the Hebrews had for the Nazirites.<sup>7</sup> The Bible describes Samuel in a way that resembles a Nazirite—the lifelong prohibition against cutting his hair (1 Sam. 1:11).

The New Testament portrays John the Baptist as having some Nazirite characteristics, but whether he considered himself to be a Nazirite is unclear. Additionally, Paul appears to have taken a Nazirite vow for a designated period of time, which he completed, as indicated by his cutting his hair (Acts 18:18).

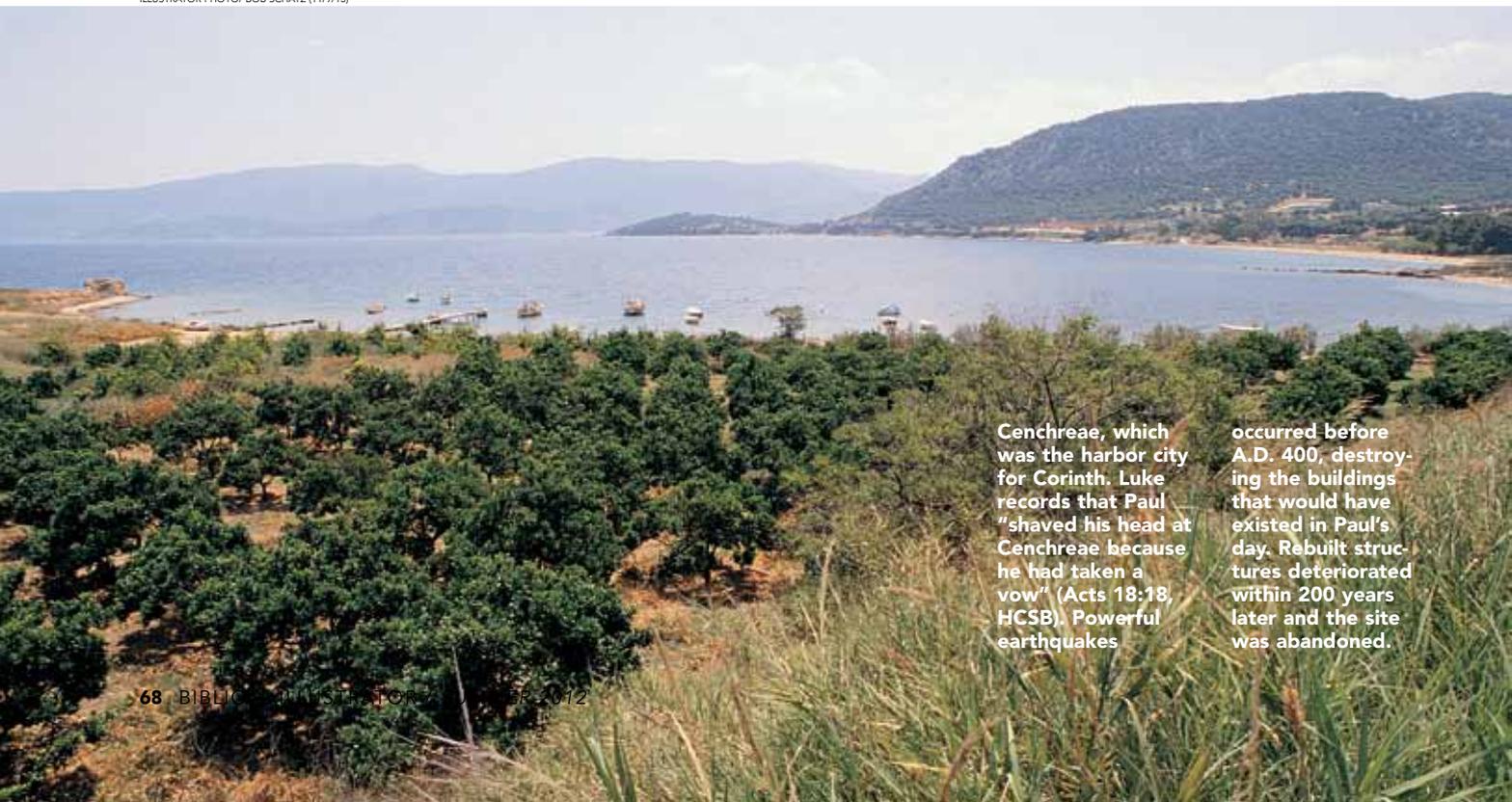
Nazirites appear in written documents late in the Second Temple period (539 B.C.–A.D. 70) and beyond. The first-century Jewish historian Josephus wrote that Bernice (born A.D. 28), the sister and wife of Herod Agrippa II, took a Nazirite vow. Josephus also claims that Herod Agrippa paid for

**Right: Bronze razor dated to Egypt's New Kingdom period (1550–1069 B.C.). Men and women in ancient cultures used oils to lubricate their skin before shaving.**

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ GB HOWELL/ CHICAGO FIELD MUSEUM (35/58/89)



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Cenchreae, which was the harbor city for Corinth. Luke records that Paul "shaved his head at Cenchreae because he had taken a vow" (Acts 18:18, HCSB). Powerful earthquakes

occurred before A.D. 400, destroying the buildings that would have existed in Paul's day. Rebuilt structures deteriorated within 200 years later and the site was abandoned.



**Above: A silver aradus; obverse depicts the head of Dagon. The reverse shows a galley ship. From Aradus, in ancient Phoenicia. Dated to early 4th cent. B.C.**

**Lower right: Wooden comb from Egypt, dated 1550–1070 B.C. Having the closely spaced teeth indicates Egyptians may have suffered with lice.**

the costly sacrifices on behalf of some Nazirites completing their vows. The *Mishnah* (translated A.D. 100–220) includes information about the Nazirite vow. The early church historian Eusebius (ca. A.D. 260–339) stated that James the brother of Jesus possibly took Nazirite vows.<sup>8</sup>

In contrast to all of these, Samson, the Old Testament judge, is the only individual the Bible specifically designates as being a Nazirite. An angel announced to Samson's mother that she would conceive and have a son who would be consecrated to God as a Nazirite. Samson acknowledged his commission (Judg. 16:17) and lived as a "lifelong" Nazirite.

Without the Lord's intervention, however, Samson may never have become involved in the service of God and Israel.<sup>9</sup> The Bible does not portray Samson in a positive manner. He was disrespectful to his parents and craved the pleasures of the pagan Philistine culture. Seeing a young Philistine woman, he demanded that his parents arrange for him to marry her (Judg. 14:1–8), an act contrary to God's law. More than once, Samson violated the prohibition not to touch a dead body. He killed and tore a lion apart with his bare hands (vv. 8–9). He grasped the "fresh" jawbone of a donkey and used it to kill 1,000 men (15:15). Finally, he encouraged Delilah to tie him with "fresh" and "undried"



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ KRISTEN HILLER (44/1476)



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ GB HOWELL/ ORIENTAL MUSEUM/ CHICAGO (67/5317)

**Above: Located about 15 miles west of Jerusalem, the hill of Zorah, overlooks the Sorek Valley below. Strategically located, Zorah provided an observational advantage for those defending one of the major routes to Jerusalem, one that led through the Sorek Valley.**

bowstrings (animal sinews). In doing so, Samson was again coming in contact with parts of a corpse (16:7–9).<sup>10</sup>

In spite of being a Nazirite, Samson reflected a self-centered personality rather than a God-centered concern for His people. This attitude led to Samson's downfall and ultimate demise. The Philistines captured him, gouged out his eyes, and put him on display in their temple to their primary god Dagon. From there Samson prayed for strength to pull down the temple upon the Philistines who were glorifying Dagon for their victory over the Israelites and their God. Samson asked God for strength so he could enact revenge upon the Philistines for gouging out his eyes. God gave him strength. Samson pushed the pillars, causing the temple to collapse and killing all who were inside—including himself.

Although Samson's interest even at the end of his life lay in revenge rather than glorifying God, the Lord used him to strip the glory from the Philistines' false god since Samson's God was

the one "left standing." Perhaps this is why Samson is listed among those whom God approved because of their faith and who "gained strength after being weak" (Heb. 11:32–34). **B**

1. Ronald B. Allen, "Numbers" in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 749.

2. "Nazirite" in *Holman Bible Dictionary* [HBD], gen. ed. Trent C. Butler (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 1991), 1011.

3. Thomas E. McComiskey, "נָזִיר" (nazar; to separate, consecrate [oneself]), in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 567.

4. McComiskey, "נָזִיר" (nezer; separation, consecration, crown), in *Theological Wordbook*, 567.

5. Allen, "Numbers," 748–49.

6. "Nazirite" in HBD, 1011.

7. R. K. Harrison, "Nazirite" in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 501.

8. *Ibid.*, 502; Josephus, *Wars of the Jews* 2.15.1; *Antiquities of the Jews* 19.6.1; Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.23.5; *Tractate Mishna Nazir*.

9. Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth*, vol. 6 in *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 424.

10. *Ibid.*, 457–58.

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