

THE NAZIRITE.

IT is sometimes of service merely to re-open questions ; to examine and criticize a prevalent theory without at the same time replacing it by another theory. This is what I propose to do in the present paper with regard to the institution of Naziriteship.

Nazirites are known alike to the earliest and latest periods of the history of the Hebrews in Palestine. The stories of the Nazirite Samson, now incorporated in the Book of Judges, are among our earliest sources, and belong perhaps to the tenth century B.C., and certainly to some period before Amos. Josephus in the first century A.D. still refers to Nazirites as familiar features in the society of his own time. During the millennium that elapsed between the earlier and the later of these two dates, did the institution remain unchanged? If it changed, can the changes be traced?

Where the data are so few as they happen to be in the present case, it is tempting to make the most of them, and to infer that what was true of the Nazirite at any period was true at every other ; or again, to press into the service references which we are not really justified in interpreting of Nazirites at all.

On the other hand, it is antecedently probable that a thousand years, and even five hundred, saw changes, and possibly very radical changes. I shall make no apology, therefore, for attempting to discover differences rather than harmonies between the various descriptions of and references to Nazirites which we possess. The present discussion is intended to be purely tentative.

The fullest account of the Nazirite is contained in the Law of Numbers vi. It will be convenient to examine other accounts and references from the standpoint of this law, to see how far they pre-suppose or exclude any or all of the regulations therein contained. It is not very necessary to determine for this purpose the date of the law in question. It will be sufficient therefore to

say here that it forms part of the Priestly Code, that term being used in its widest sense as including the secondary as well as the primary elements in the priestly part of the Pentateuch. The date of the literary origin of the law falls somewhere about or after 500 B. C.

(i) *The vow*.—Naziriteship according to the law in Numbers vi is the result of a vow on the part of the person who becomes a Nazirite¹. On the other hand, there is no evidence that either Samson or Samuel or the Nazirites mentioned in Am. ii 11 ff. ever took a vow; though Samuel is the subject of a vow taken by his mother (1 Sam. i 11). Like a prophet (Jer. i 5), the Nazirite of early times might be sanctified from the womb (Judg. xiii 5).

(ii) *The term*.—This brings us at once to an obvious difference which has always been recognized, though not perhaps sufficiently explained. The law is concerned with a terminable vow; Samuel and Samson are Nazirites for life. Were these two forms of Naziriteship—the permanent and the temporary—equally ancient? If not, which was the more ancient? And was the younger a mere development from the elder? Did permanent and terminable Naziriteship always, did they ever, co-exist? In the present section I will simply state and examine the direct evidence. Indirectly the treatment of the hair (see next section) bears on the question.

a. There is no direct evidence of the existence of temporary Nazirites before the Exile. Samson was a Nazirite for life (Judg. xiii 5, 7); Samuel was to remain unshorn all his days (1 Sam. i 11). In both the foregoing cases the Nazirite was intended to be such from birth to death. The remaining early reference to Nazirites is in Am. ii 11 ff.—‘I raised up of your sons for prophets, and of your young men for Nazirites. . . . But ye gave the Nazirites wine to drink: and commanded the prophets, saying, Prophesy not.’ Here the Nazirites are mentioned as a parallel class to the prophets; like the prophets, they owe their position to JAHWE, not to any vow they have taken upon themselves; and there is as little reason for supposing that their calling was temporary as there would be for thinking that the prophetic calling was such.

¹ See also *Nasir*—the tract of the Mishna which deals with Nazirites—*passim*, and, though the term Nazirite is not actually used, Acts xxi 23 ff., Jos. B. J. ii 15. 1.

the brother of the Lord' comes much nearer. But the truth is, the descriptions of John the Baptist in the Gospels (Mt. iii 4 = Mk. i 6 = Lk. i 15; Mt. xi 18 = Lk. vii 33), and of James in Eusebius are descriptions of permanent *ascetics* (cf. especially Mt. xi 18 = Lk. vii 33 for John); and their practice in so far as it resembles that of the Nazirite is but *part* of their ascetic life. We have no ground for thinking that the permanent Nazirites of early Israel were ascetics; Samson must strike us as very much the reverse. The best evidence for permanent Nazirites in later Judaism is *Nazir*. But are the regulations for the life-long Nazirite there given called forth by the actualities of life or the speculative legalism of the Rabbis? This is too large a question to discuss here.

To sum up: permanent Nazirites were a familiar feature in early Hebrew society; a case needs to be made out for the existence of temporary Nazirites before the Exile, though the paucity of our evidence does not justify us in using the *argument e silentio* to deny their existence: after the Exile down to the Fall of Jerusalem, temporary Nazirites were numerous, permanent Nazirites probably rare, if known at all, in actual life.

(iii) *The treatment of the Nazirite's hair*.—The growth of the hair is common to both forms of Naziriteship; it plays a conspicuous part in the Samson stories; it is the subject of one of the regulations in the law. It was so characteristic a feature of the Nazirite that, at least as early as the sixth century B.C., Nazirite was used metaphorically of an unclipped vine (Lev. xxv 5, 11). It would almost appear from Judg. xvi 17 that it was at one time the only essential characteristic of the Nazirite. The growth of the hair is the most certainly permanent feature of the Nazirite from the earliest to the latest times. And yet even here a most significant difference emerges. The hair of a temporary Nazirite becomes at the close of the period of the vow a *hair offering* (Num. vi 18); but this is precisely what the hair of the life-long Nazirite never was and never could be. Is the treatment of the hair in the former case, then, a mere modification of the treatment in the latter? Is it not at least equally probable that it has an independent origin, and that the striking difference in the end and purpose of the two treatments is to be thus explained?

Neither treatment should be explained as to its origin by peculiarly Hebrew ideas; for both treatments are wide-spread

and originate in very primitive doctrine¹; viz. that the hair, whether remaining on the body or cut off, is, so to speak, part of the man's personality; hence, (1) if it is considered important to preserve a man's personality intact, his strength undiminished, he is never shorn at all; (2) shorn hair must be preserved from improper uses, especially from falling into the hands of one's foes, for power over the hair would give them power also over the man; (3) for the same reason shorn hair is a most suitable sacrifice; it is the offering of a part of one's self. The treatment of the hair of the permanent Nazirite must be explained by (1); that of the temporary Nazirite by (3) rather than by (2), for the fact that the hair is burnt in the altar fire points to its sacrificial character². There are other instances of what may reasonably be explained as survivals of hair-offerings among the Hebrews: such are the shaving of the head for the dead (e. g. Deut. xiv 1; see Driver's note on the passage) and, possibly, Absalom's annual cutting of his hair (2 Sam. xiv 26). In any case the growth of the hair is not so peculiar to the two forms of Nazirites that we need on this account to explain the treatment of the hair by the temporary Nazirite as a mere modification of its treatment by the permanent Nazirite. The converse supposition is very unlikely; if the hair was first suffered to grow in order that it might furnish an offering, it is exceedingly improbable that the practice was so modified that the offering became an impossibility.

(iv) *Avoidance of pollution by a dead body.*—Dead bodies were in general a cause of pollution (Num. xix); the special regulation laid down in the law for a Nazirite who became thus polluted is quite intelligible as a regulation for persons under a *temporary* vow. Pollution of this kind may befall any one quite accidentally; if the vow is temporary and has been accidentally interrupted, it can be recommenced as the law provides (Num. vi 9-12). This is impossible if Naziriteship was in the first instance intended to be life-long. Could such regulations have been framed for a large class of life-long devotees such as the Nazirites appear to have been (see above,

¹ Cf. Frazer, *Golden Bough*, i 193-207; Tylor, *Primitive Culture*², ii 401; Robertson Smith, *Religion of Semites*², pp. 323-333; Goldziher, *Muhammedanische Studien*, i 247-251; *Vendidad*, Fargard xvii, with Darmesteter's introductory note, S. B. E. iv p. 185 ff.

² Cf. the treatment of hair by the Arabs at the close of a vow, Wellhausen, *Reste*, p. 118.

sect. ii a)? The only other instance of any one being forbidden to incur pollution by the dead under any circumstances is that of an individual—the high priest (Lev. xxi 10 ff.). But we may go further: the very purpose and character of Samson's life is inconsistent with avoidance of pollution by the dead: cf. particularly Judg. xv 8, 16. Samuel, too, must have suffered pollution when he 'hewed Agag in pieces' (1 Sam. xv 33). The difficulty was already perceived and, in their own way, met by the early Rabbis: Samson, so they inferred, belonged to an entirely different order of Nazirites, subject to entirely different regulations from those laid down in the law. 'What is the difference between a perpetual Nazirite (i. e. one who has taken the vow according to the law for life) and a Nazirite of the Samson type? A perpetual Nazirite, when his hair becomes heavy, may lighten it (by cutting it) with a razor, and must then present the three (sacrificial) animals (Num. vi 14); and if he becomes (accidentally) defiled (by contact with the dead) he must bring the offering (required in the case) of (such) defilement (Numb. vi 9-12). A Nazirite of the Samson type must never cut his hair when it grows heavy; on the other hand, if he becomes polluted by the dead he does not bring the offering (required by the law in the case) of (such) defilement¹, *Nasir* i 2. Permission to cut the hair of the perpetual Nazirite seems based on the practice of Absalom (2 Sam. xiv 26), who was held to have been a perpetual Nazirite². It is then no mere *argumentum e silentio* that enables us to assert that at least one regulation of the law did not apply to the perpetual Nazirite of early times.

(v) *Abstinence from all products of the vine and from all intoxicants.*—Was this a permanent element in Naziriteship? Much depends on the amount of prejudice we feel justified in carrying with us from the law (Num. vi 4) to our consideration of the earlier passages. In view of the conclusion reached in the preceding section, we may well consider them without such prejudice. Taking them *seriatim* we notice—

a. The case of Samuel. The story of Samuel's birth (1 Sam. i) is drawn from a source probably belonging to the eighth century B. C. If we might follow the LXX in 1 Sam. i 11, the

¹ מה בין נזיר עולם לנזיר שמשתן נזיר עולם הנביד שעזר אינו מיקל בתוך זמנא שלוש בהמות ואם נאסא זמנא קרבן שומאה נזיר שמשתן הנביד שעזר אינו מיקל ואם נאסא אינו מביא קרבן שומאה.

² See Bartenora and Maimonides on *Nasir* i 2 in Surenhusius, *Mishna*.

enforcement on Nazirites of abstinence from intoxicants would be clearly established for that period. For in the LXX Hannah's vow with regard to Samuel includes the clause, absent from the Hebrew, *καὶ οἶνον καὶ μέθυσμα οὐ πίνειαι*. But the LXX is 'probably an amplification of the Hebrew text, by means of elements borrowed from Num. iii 9, xviii 6, vi 3 designed with the view of representing Samuel's dedication as more complete'¹. This then leaves us without conclusive evidence either one way or the other. Samuel used to be present on festal occasions when it can scarcely be doubted that wine was drunk, and we are never told that he himself abstained; see 1 Sam. ix 11 ff. (from one of the earliest sources incorporated in the book of Samuel, belonging to the tenth or ninth century B.C.), 1 Sam. xi 14 ff., xvi 2 ff.

b. Samson. It is difficult to think of Samson sitting as a teetotaler at the feasts or drinking-bouts (*משותה*) that he gave. Had the writer had this in mind we should have expected him to dwell on Samson's singularity, rather than on his following the common practice of bridegrooms in his day (Judg. xiv 10).

Against the fact that the stories of Samson do not leave upon us the impression of one who was a total abstainer, we have to set the fact that his mother is bidden to abstain from all intoxicants, all products of the vine, all unclean eatables (Judg. xiii 4, 7, 14). The inference commonly made that the writer thought of the son as permanently subject to the same restrictions, though not necessary, is certainly neither unreasonable nor improbable. But what was the date of the writer in question? This cannot be discussed here; it must suffice to refer to Böhme's discussion², in which he argues for the presence of glosses in the story of Samson's birth (Judg. xiii), or to Budde's commentary (pp. 90 ff.) where the position is maintained that that story, itself composite, is later in origin than the other stories about Samson. It is worth observing that the other stories presuppose that part of the angel's message (xiii 4 f.) which refers to the growth of Samson's hair (Judg. xvi 17), but show no knowledge of any of the other restrictions.

c. The Nazirite contemporaries of Amos.—The passage in

¹ Driver, *Hebrew Text of Samuel*, pp. 10 f.

² *Zeitschr. für die A. T. Wissenschaft*, 1885, pp. 261 ff.

Amos ii 11 ff. gains additional point if we assume that Nazirites at the time were compelled to abstain from wine: but it does not necessarily presuppose such a regulation. There is a passage in Isaiah (xxviii 7) worth citing in this connexion—'the priest and the prophet have erred through strong drink, they are swallowed up of wine, they are gone astray through strong drink: they err in vision, they stumble in judgment.' In the light of this we could explain the passages in Amos as meaning simply—you stopped the activity of the Nazirites by making them intoxicated, and the message of the prophets by forbidding them to speak. Still this is scarcely the most probable explanation: and it may be considered likely that abstinence from wine (though not necessarily also from all products of the vine) goes back as far as the eighth century B. C.

(vi) *The offerings*.—These are made either (a) at the end of the period of the vow, or (b) on the interruption of a vow by accidental pollution. Since, as we have seen (section iv), the permanent Nazirite was not affected in any special manner by pollution, it is unlikely that the permanent Nazirite ever made any offerings in consequence of his Naziriteship. This constitutes a significant difference; for the offerings in the case of the temporary Nazirite formed an important, perhaps the most fundamental, element in the vow; the abstinences enforced during the period of the vow being subsidiary to the final act. A parallel is afforded by the Arabic *Ihrām*¹.

Under the several preceding sections, I have drawn attention to certain indisputable and certain probable or possible differences between the permanent and the temporary Nazirite, or, to put it otherwise, between the Nazirite as known to us from pre-exilic sources and the Nazirite as known to us from post-exilic sources. How are these differences to be accounted for? The data do not justify a very complete or certain answer. But I will conclude with making a few suggestions as to various possibilities and with pointing out the uncertainty of some prevalent theories which are in danger of being put forward as established facts.

1. I have assumed up till now that when the story tells us that Samson was a Nazirite it intends us to understand that he belonged to a clearly defined class marked by certain recog-

¹ See Wellhausen, *Reste des Arab. Heidenthums*¹, 116-118.

nized peculiarities. This is not absolutely necessary; the word itself simply means a devotee. It is *possible* that the writer may mean nothing more than that he is to be devoted to JAHWĒ, and that he might have used the term Nazirite indifferently of various classes of sacred persons, such as prophets or priests. In that case the earliest use of the term in a more specific sense would be Am. ii 11 ff. But this is not probable. In view of the close association of the term with a reference to the unshorn hair in Judg. xvi 17, and the subsequent metaphorical use of Nazirite of the unclipped vine (Lev. xxv 5), it is tolerably certain that, as early as the tenth century, Nazirite denoted a person devoted to JAHWĒ, and outwardly distinguished by his unshorn locks.

2. The prohibition in the law of wine, strong drink, and the products of the vine, looks as though it were due to a fusion of two heterogeneous customs. Wine may be forbidden either as an intoxicant or as a product of the vine; in the former case all other intoxicants are naturally included in the prohibition ('wine and strong drink'); in the latter all other products of the vine ('wine and the products of the vine'). The former prohibition may have regard to the incapacitating effects of alcoholic liquors (so probably in the case of the priests at the time of officiating, Ezek. xliv 21, Lev. x 9) or to their agreeableness to the appetite, a consideration which may account for abstinence from these liquors during the period of a vow¹. But neither of these two reasons would account for the prohibition of all products of the vine. This latter prohibition has been explained with much probability as originating in a strict desire to keep to ancient custom; the vine was unknown to the nomads; religious conservatism led certain classes of devotees upon settlement in Canaan, a land of vines, to avoid everything connected with it². The Rechabites, with whom the Nazirites have been compared, were in all probability such a class of devotees maintaining from religious motives an ancient mode of life—abstaining from wine, though not so far as we know from other intoxicants, from planting vineyards, sowing seed, and building houses

¹ Cf. the cases of abstinence from wine and women during a vow among the Arabs, cited by Wellhausen, *Reste*¹, 116.

² Cf. e.g. Smend, *Alttestamentliche Religionsgeschichte*¹, p. 152 n; Kayser-Marti, *Theologie des A. T.*² 77; Nowack, *Hebr. Arch.* ii 133 ff.

(Jer. xxxv). But if this be the true explanation of the Nazirite custom, it does not account for the prohibition of all intoxicants; for not all intoxicants are unknown to the nomads. It appears to me hazardous to infer that the early Hebrew Nazirites were, like the Rechabites, protestants against the culture and life of Canaan; their abstinence from wine, on which the comparison is generally based, is far from proved; and then again, can Samson, who takes his wives of the people of the land, and who attends their festivals, be seriously regarded as an opponent of Canaanite culture?

3. Possible stages in the growth of Naziriteship. The stories of Samson and Samuel show clearly that in early Israel certain devotees left their hair unshorn in token of their devotion to JAHWE. This practice need not be regarded either as a remnant of nomadic life, or as due to Canaanite influence. It is based on beliefs shown by anthropological research to be widespread. Such devotees were sometimes called Nazirites, a term which was, probably as early as the tenth century B. C., specifically employed of devotees who suffered their hair to grow long. In the eighth century Nazirites were a familiar class of sacred persons similar in some respects to the prophets. When we next hear of Nazirites we find them to be persons who take a vow upon themselves for a short period, and at the end of the period make an offering of their hair and present certain animal offerings as well. How can the change be accounted for? I suggest the following as a possible explanation.

Vows were commonly taken in early times; and to judge by analogies, such as those instanced above among the Arabs, and by the later Hebrew practice in the case of the Nazirite's vow, certain abstinences were practised during the period of the vow. In some cases the hair was suffered to grow and offered at the close of the period of the vow. To persons under such vows the term Nazirite, originally used of permanent religious devotees, was extended on account of the common treatment of the hair. But at what period? This cannot be certainly determined. It was possible as soon as the secondary sense of the word Nazirite (a person with unshorn hair) exceeded in prominence the primary sense (a devotee); and this had certainly taken place by the sixth century B. C., as is shown by the metaphorical use of the word in Lev. xxv 5, 11. It is perhaps

most likely that the old term received this new application at the time when the old application had ceased to be necessary owing to the disappearance of the class which it had defined.

In this case then the term Nazirite would be ancient, but not as applied to persons under a temporary vow; many regulations in the law of Numbers vi are also ancient, though not originally connected with Nazirites, some being derived from the practice of associating certain inconveniences with the term of a vow, some from the protests of religious classes against prevalent customs. The fusion took place when the origin of the latter type of practices had been lost sight of.

But in detail all this is merely suggestive. My main object has been to raise the question whether the connexion between the permanent Nazirite and the temporary Nazirite was more than nominal and external. If the connexion be only such, it cannot but be misleading to explain the one institution by the other, or to interpret the one set of passages by reference to the other set.

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