

*The Routledge Encyclopedia of Ancient Mediterranean Religions*, ed. Eric Orlin, Lisbeth S. Fried, Jennifer Wright Knust, Michael L. Satlow, 642. New York and London: Routledge, 2016.

## Nazirite

A Nazirite (from the Hebrew meaning “dedicated” or “consecrated”), according to both the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, refers to an Israelite man or woman who has achieved a high, priestly level of holiness through abstaining for a given period (post-biblically defined as a minimum of thirty days) or for life from wine, grape products, contact with the dead (even of one’s immediate family) and cutting of one’s hair. At the end of the vowed period, or should contact with the dead cancel the vow, the Nazirite’s hair is shorn and offered with other sacrifices on the altar.

Post-biblical sources suggest that a person might become a Nazirite, especially for a finite period of time, for a variety of legitimate reasons: penitence, seeking divine favor at a time of distress or danger, and self-discipline. Although it is impossible to gauge how widespread such practices were in either biblical or post-biblical times, they appear to have gained some traction, at least within limited circles, as a form of popular piety. Even though Nazirite practice per se probably became extinct with the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE (for lack of the sacrificial component of the practice), it remained representative of other forms of supererogatory abstinence, including other types of vows. The merits and limits of such practices were debated among the rabbis. In these texts the Nazirite becomes emblematic both of the ideal of supererogatory abstinence and of its dangers.

### ***Suggested Reading***

Chepey, S. *Nazirites in Late Second Temple Judaism: A Survey of Ancient Jewish Writings, the New Testament, Archaeological Evidence, and Other Writings from Late Antiquity*. Brill, 2005.  
Fraade, S. D. “Ascetical Aspects of Ancient Judaism.” In *Jewish Spirituality: From the Bible Through the Middle Ages* (A. Green, ed.), 253–288. Crossroad Press, 1988.