

**FASTING** (צֹם, *tsom*; νηστεία, *nēsteia*; ἀσιτέω, *asiteō*). A ritual of abstaining from food and/or drink for a predetermined period; practiced in the Bible primarily as a means of mourning. Fasting frequently occurs in the Old Testament in response to suffering or disaster, in conjunction with other mourning rituals.

### **Fasting in the Ancient Near East**

In Mesopotamia, fasting was a part of mourning rituals. It was a public display of one's grief that stood in stark contrast to celebration (Scurlock, "Death and the Afterlife," 1886). In the ancient Near East, fasting held social significance similar to feasting. Both practices could create or renew a social bond and displayed an individual's or group's current state. While feasting was often a public display of wealth and success, fasting was a display of humility and grief (Pollock, "Feasts, Funerals and Fast Food," 21–22).

There is evidence that fasting was practiced as a signal of mourning by one country's king for the death of an allied country's counterpart (Pham, *Mourning*, 22–23). Fasting by people in the ancient world also could indicate a troubled spirit (Sharon, "When Fathers Refuse," 138). In one example from late Egyptian literature, the pharaoh's refusal to eat or drink expressed his troubled emotional state (Sharon, "When Fathers Refuse," 138). Once the pharaoh was comforted, he resumed eating.

Ancient Egypt was an agricultural country, where life was centered on the production of food. Food production depended on the fertility of the land, which was controlled by the fertility cults of Osiris and Apis. These deities were responsible for the success or failure of the ground to produce crops (MacDermot, *Cult of the Seer*, 39). Fasting might have been used as a way of gaining the gods' favor. The importance of food also was evident in beliefs about the afterlife. People ate funerary meals as a means of communicating with dead ancestors. Thus, food played a role in the religious and social life of the community. By fasting, individuals could dissociate themselves from other people and society, perhaps to move closer to the divine (MacDermot, *Cult of the Seer*, 39–40).

### **Fasting in the Old Testament**

Apart from the Day of Atonement, fasting is absent from the Pentateuch but appears throughout the rest of the Old Testament. Fasting is frequently performed along with other practices of mourning, lamentation, or penitence, and it often is conjoined with prayer. At times, fasting functions as a preventative measure prior to engaging in dangerous activity, such as a journey or battle.

In the Old Testament, people often tear their clothes and dress in sackcloth and ashes as they fast (e.g., 2 Sam 1:11–12; Dan 9:3; Esth 4:3). Such activities mark the participants as being in a lowly state and indicate weakness; fasting is a means of physically lowering oneself.

#### *The Day of Atonement*

The Mosaic law contains only one command to fast, connected with the Day of Atonement (Lev 16:29–31; 23:26–33; Num 29:7–11). The Hebrew text does not use the word for fast (צֹם, *tsom*), but instead uses אָנַח (*anah*), which is often translated as "deny yourself" (NRSV). This

more general reference may imply that other forms of self-denial were also intended, such as abstinence from contact with the opposite sex, from anointing with oil or bathing, or from wearing sandals (*Yoma* 8:1; Hartley, “Atonement,” 58).

The term *אָנָּח* (*anah*) also means “to afflict,” “to weaken,” “be humble,” or “be bowed down” (*BDB*, 776). On a day when the sins of the people were to be atoned for, afflicting or denying oneself by fasting would serve as an outward sign of inner repentance for breaking God’s law (Brongers, “Fasting in Israel,” 15). Another purpose of this fast may have been the belief that the temporary suspension of normal activities such as eating allowed one to focus on God and acknowledge dependence on Him (Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers*, 405).

In Isaiah 58:3–6, the term for fast (*צוֹם*, *tsom*) parallels *אָנָּח* (*anah*) and expresses fasting as humbling or denying oneself (Grimm, *From Feasting*, 193). Further, in Psalm 35:13, the speaker says he afflicted or humbled himself through fasting (Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers*, 405).

### *Other Fasts*

In addition to the fast on the Day of Atonement, the Old Testament mentions general and individual fasts undertaken for a variety of purposes, including mourning, repentance, and seeking divine deliverance. Fasting was a means of asking God to have pity and relent from inflicting punishment on the person or people praying. For example, David hoped to see divine compassion over his newborn son’s life by fasting, perhaps imitating the conditions surrounding death (2 Sam 12:17–23). The Israelites also practiced fasting following the loss of loved ones. After the death of his sons, Aaron refused to eat the prescribed priestly meal (Lev 10:16–20). In Aaron’s case, the fast suggests not only mourning but also rage, as he declined to eat with God because God had struck down his sons (Lev 10:1–3; Sharon, “When Fathers Refuse,” 138).

Other passages suggest that fasting acted as an aid for prayer (Neh 1:4–10; Pss 35:13; 109:21–24; Dan 6:18; 9:3; 10:1–3). Israelite leaders prayed and fasted during wartime to ask for God’s guidance and intervention (Judg 20:26–28; 1 Sam 7:5–13) and to make requests for success in battle (2 Chr 20:3). Fasting also accompanied prayer when requesting relief from famine (Jer 14:1–12; Joel 1:14). Those fasting may have hoped their denial and anguish would produce a response from God.

Fasting in observance of Purim is often traced to the book of Esther. Purim is a two-day festival—a fast followed by a feast—to celebrate the Jews’ deliverance from destruction and their victory over their enemies. Both fasting and feasting are mentioned in Esth 9:25–32.

### *Examples of Fasting in the Old Testament*

#### **Fasting Associated with Repentance and Confession**

1 Sam 7:6

The Israelites fast as a way of turning away from foreign gods and back to the Lord.

Neh 9:1–2

The Israelites fast and confess their sins once all the foreigners are removed from their community.

Jonah 3:4–9

The Ninevites fast when they learn that the city will be overturned in 40 days.

### **Fasting in Association with Mourning**

1 Sam 31:12

When Saul and his sons are killed in battle, the men of Jabesh-Gilead fast.

2 Sam 1:12

David and his men fast when they learn of Saul's death.

### **Fasting in Association with Danger**

Judges 20:26

The Israelites fight the tribe of Benjamin. Despite having more soldiers, they are losing, so they return to their camp and fast and weep. The result is that the Lord defeats the Benjaminites (Judg 20:35).

2 Chr 20:1–3

When the Moabites and Ammonites come up against Jehoshaphat in battle, Jehoshaphat proclaims a fast in Judah. The Lord brings victory (2 Chr 20:22).

Ezra 8:21–23

A fast is proclaimed prior to the return journey from Babylon to Judaea.

Neh 1:4

Nehemiah fasts when he hears that the gates of Jerusalem have been destroyed and the captives are in danger.

Esth 4:3

When Haman's decree to kill the Jews reaches the provinces of the king, there is mourning and fasting for the Jews.

Esth 4:16

Esther, who is about to risk her life by seeking an audience with the king, proclaims a three-day fast for all the Jews in Susa.

Joel 1:13–15

Joel prophesies the day of the Lord which will bring destruction. The audience is told to lament and sanctify a fast.

## **Fasting in Second Temple Literature**

Fasting as a practice of the pious seems to have been a late development. Literature of the Second Temple period records this association (see Grimm, *From Feasting*, 21), commending fasting accompanied with prayer as an act of devotion (Tobit 12:8; *Testament of Joseph*, 3:4) that would be rewarded with divine favor (Judith 4:9–13).

During the Second Temple period, fasting was associated with experiencing God's presence; it was a common ascetic practice of seers and was believed to promote visions or dreams (*Apocalypse of Abraham*, 9:7–10; 12:1–3; *3 Baruch*, 4:14–15). Individuals may have fasted as a form of ritual cleansing prior to an encounter with God (1 Maccabees 3:47; *Testament of Moses*, 9:6). Meeting God meant approaching the realm of the sacred. Therefore, worshipers needed to prepare for the encounter by avoiding things associated with the mortal realm, such as food (Fraade, "Ascetical Aspects," 262). The goal in this form of fasting was to master one's passions, prevent sin, and purify the soul.

This view may reflect a dualistic notion of the dichotomy between body and soul, in which the aim was to subdue normal bodily desires, punishing the earthly part of an individual while liberating the spiritual part (Fraade, "Ascetical Aspects," 262). Dualism teaches of a human spirit that connects a person with the divine and a body that connects that person with the Earth and animals—a body which favors the earthly over the divine. A dualistic perspective also would support the belief that access to God requires strengthening the soul by weakening the body, which fasting would accomplish. Fasting would defeat bodily impulses that could keep it connected with earthly things rather than the divine (Fraade, "Ascetical Aspects," 262).

## **Fasting in the New Testament**

In the New Testament, fasting occurs primarily in the Gospels, where it is a regular practice of John, his disciples, and the Pharisees (Matt 9:14; Mark 2:18; Luke 5:33; 18:12). Jesus fasts for 40 days during His temptation in the wilderness. Luke and Acts depict fasting as a part of worship (Luke 2:37; Acts 14:23).

### *Jesus and Fasting*

The Gospels record Jesus fasting, perhaps to express reliance on God in times of temptation or spiritual warfare (e.g., Matt 4:1–2; Luke 4:2). Although Mark's description of Jesus' temptation omits any reference to fasting, he does describe angels caring for Jesus (Mark 1:13), which may suggest that Jesus was receiving heavenly food in the wilderness.

In the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 6:16–18), Jesus criticizes those who fast hypocritically in order to attract attention. He tells people to give alms, pray, and fast in ways that are visible only to God. They should not mar their faces or look gloomy; instead, they should wash their faces and put oil on their heads so that only God knows they are fasting.

Because the Pharisees fasted, as did disciples of John the Baptist, Jesus' disciples were unusual for not fasting (Matt 9:14–15; Mark 2:18–20; Luke 5:33–35). Jesus defends this behavior using a parable of a bridegroom. He indicates that His presence, like a bridegroom's, was a cause for celebration, making fasting inappropriate. According to Jesus, a time for mourning (and fasting) would be fitting when the bridegroom is taken away (Matt 9:15; Mark 2:20; Luke 5:34).

## *Fasting in Acts*

The earliest Christian fasts seem to have been voluntary and were undertaken for a variety of reasons, such as self-discipline and reinforcement while praying. Calling for God's blessing on the church's mission, the church at Antioch engaged in fasting before sending out missionaries (Acts 13:2–3) and in connection with the appointment of presbyters (Acts 14:23).

## **Fasting in the Early Church**

A number of Christian authors comment on fasting, indicating that it was widely practiced by the church before the middle of the third century (Brattston, "Fasting," 238). Various Christian documents reference fasting as an ongoing practice. While the Didache encourages fasting and mentions a twice-weekly fast (*Did.*, 8:1), the Shepherd of Hermas conveys that obedience is more righteous than fasting (*Shepherd of Hermas*, Similitude 5:1–4).

The early church fathers might have believed that fasting could conquer temptations (Polycarp, *Phil.*, 7:2) and prepare people for worship (Origen, *Hom. Lev.*, 7.1.3; Brattston, "Fasting," 239). Certain texts recommend fasting before baptism (*Did.*, 7:4; Tertullian, *Bapt.*, 20).

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