

International Standard Bible Encyclopedia

Fast; Fasting:

fast, fast'-ing (tsūm; ʔinnah nephesh, "afflict soul or self," i.e. practice self-denial; nesteia, nesteuein): It is necessary to get rid of some modern notions associated with fasting before we can form a correct idea of its origin and significance in the ancient world. For instance, in the case of many ailments the dieting of the patient is an essential part of the remedy. But we may readily assume that originally fasting was not based on the salutary influence which it exercised on the health of the subject. Considerations of therapeutics played no part in the institution. The theory that fasting, like many other ancient customs, had a religious origin, is in favor with scholars, but we must not assume a religious origin for all practices which in process of time came to be associated with religion.

Many customs, purely secular in their origin, have gradually obtained a religious significance, just as purely religious customs have been dissociated from religion. It is also possible and, in the light of some usages, probable, that different motives operated in the association of fasting, as of some other customs, with religion. Scholars have been too ready to assume that the original significance of fasting was the same in all countries and among all nations. Robertson Smith in his *Religion of the Semites* advanced and defended theory that fasting was merely a mode of preparation for the tribal meal in which sacrifice originated, and came to be considered at a later stage as part of the sacrificial act. This hypothesis apparently accounts for the otherwise strange fact that both fasting and feasting are religious acts, but it does not give a satisfactory explanation of the constant association of fasting with the "wearing of sackcloth," the "putting of ashes on the head," and other similar customs. It is obvious that very different motives operated in the institution of fasting and of feasting religious observances.

It is a matter of common observation and experience that great distress causes loss of appetite and therefore occasions abstinence from food. Hannah, who was greatly distressed on account of her childlessness, "wept, and did not eat" ([1Sa 1:7](#)). Violent anger produces the same effect ([1Sa 20:34](#)). According to [1Ki 21:4](#), Ahab, "heavy and displeased" on account of Naboth's refusal to part with his estate, sulked and "would eat no bread." Fasting, originally the natural expression of grief, became the customary mode of proving to others the inner emotion of sorrow. David demonstrated his grief at Abner's death ([2Sa 3:35](#)) by fasting, just as the Psalmist indicated his sympathy with his adversaries' sorry plight in the same way ([Ps 35:13](#)). In such passages as [Ezr 10:6](#); [Es 4:3](#), it is not clear whether fasting is used in its religious significance or simply as a natural expression of sorrow (compare also [Lu 5:33](#) and see below). This view explains the association of fasting with the mourning customs of antiquity (compare [1Sa 31:13](#); [2Sa 1:12](#)).

As fasting was a perfectly natural and human expression and evidence of the subject's grief, it readily claimed a place among those religious customs whose main object was the pacification of the anger of God, or the excitation of His compassion. Any and every act that would manifest the distressful state of the suppliant would appeal to the Deity and move Him to pity. The interesting incident recorded in [2Sa 12:16-23](#) suggests the twofold significance of fasting as a religious act or a mode of appealing to the Deity and as a funeral custom. David defends his fasting before and not after the child's death on the ground that while the child was alive David's prayer might be answered. His fasting was intended to make his petition effectual (compare also [1Ki](#)

[21:27](#); [Ezr 8:21](#); [Es 4:16](#)). Occasionally fasting was proclaimed on a national scale, e.g. in case of war ([Jdg 20:26](#); [2Ch 20:3](#)) or of pestilence ([Joe 1:13 f](#)). Fasting having thus become a recognized mode of seeking Divine favor and protection, it was natural that it should be associated with confession of sin, as indisputable evidence of penitence or sorrow for sin. Fasting might be partial, i.e. abstinence from certain kinds of food, or total, i.e. abstinence from all food as well as from washing, anointing, sleeping. It might be of shorter or longer duration, e.g. for one day, from sunrise to sunset ([Jdg 20:26](#); [1Sa 14:24](#); [2Sa 1:12](#); [3:35](#)).

In [1Sa 31:13](#) allusion is made to a seven days' fast, while Daniel abstained from "pleasant bread," flesh, wine and anointing for three weeks ([Da 10:3](#)). Moses ([Ex 34:28](#)) and Elijah ([1Ki 19:8](#)) fasted for 40 days. It is probable that these last three references presuppose a totally different conception of the significance of fasting. It is obvious that dreams made a deep impression on primitive man. They were communications from the departed members of the family. At a later stage they were looked upon as revelations from God. During sleep there is total abstinence from food. It was easy to draw the inference that fasting might fit the person to receive these communications from the world of spirits ([Da 10:2](#)). The close connection between fasting and insight-intellectual and spiritual-between simple living and high thinking is universally recognized.