

# DID JESUS' DISCIPLES FAST?\*

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In [MATTHEW 6:16-18](#) JESUS TOLD how His disciples should fast, whereas in [Mark 2:18-22](#) He taught that there was no need to fast while He, the bridegroom, was present. This study examines the relationship of these two passages on fasting, in an effort to determine whether Jesus' disciples fasted.

## THE LITERARY CONTEXT OF [MATTHEW 6:16-18](#)

[Matthew 6:16-18](#), part of the Sermon on the Mount, is one of three parallel sections: almsgiving (vv. 2-4), prayer (vv. 5-15), and fasting (vv. 16-18).<sup>1</sup> Verse 1 states the general principle that those who do acts of piety should not practice their righteousness before people.<sup>2</sup> The three acts of piety that follow illustrate how to implement the principle.<sup>3</sup> This literary form is found in the

<sup>1</sup> The three sections involve the same pairs of opposites: public-secret; people-Father; present reward-future reward (Ulrich Luz, [Matthew 1-7](#), trans. James E. Crouch [Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2007], 297).

<sup>2</sup> David Daube, [The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism](#) (London: Athlone, 1956), 63-66.

<sup>3</sup> Some have suggested that the reason almsgiving, prayer, and fasting were mentioned is that they were the central elements in religion ([Tobit 12:18](#)). Alfred Plummer suggested that almsgiving represents one's relationship with others, prayer relates to one's relationship with God, and fasting pertains to personal discipline ([The Gospel according to S. Matthew](#) [London: Charles Scribner, 1917], 90). Curtis C. Mitchell observes that the three pillars of Jewish piety are not equal in importance in the New Testament. Prayer is of greatest

Old Testament<sup>4</sup> as well as in rabbinic literature.<sup>5</sup> The acts of piety described in [Matthew 6](#) have no precise parallels in the New Testament, although a number of noncanonical writings attest to the antiquity of the tradition itself.<sup>6</sup> [Matthew 6](#) describes the righteousness Jesus demanded, a righteousness that must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees ([5:20](#)).

## [MATTHEW 6:16-18](#)

Whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance so that they will be noticed by men when they are fasting. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face so that your fasting will not be noticed by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

## GENERAL OVERVIEW

Verse 1 sounds the alarm for the hearers to watch out or be careful ([προσέχετε](#)) for their righteousness. The righteousness sought and guarded is illustrated by the improper and proper performance of fasting. Improper performance, defined as an outward display of piety, has serious ramifications. These individuals will miss out on eschatological reward because they have chosen to have their reward in the present by exhibiting their external pious acts before people

importance because of the attention given to it in the Gospels ("The Practice of Fasting in the New Testament," [Bibliotheca Sacra](#) 147 [October-December 1990]: 457).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. [Leviticus 18:1-28](#) and [Ecclesiastes 3:1-8](#).

<sup>5</sup> For examples see Daube, [The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism](#), 64-66.

<sup>6</sup> [Oxyrhynchus Papyri](#) 1.2; 654.5; [Coptic Gospel of Thomas](#) 1.6.27; [II Clement](#) 16.4; and [Didache](#) 8.1.2.

(vv. 1b, 5). Jesus taught that those who refuse the outward ostentatious display of fasting in the present will receive their reward on the day of judgment in the end times (v. 6).

A fundamental theological idea is being expressed in the text about the activity of God. God, whom people do not visibly perceive, nevertheless sees whether people are properly performing their acts of piety. Moreover, the truly righteous person is to emulate God. As God goes about activities “in the hidden” (ἐν τῷ κρυπτῷ, vv. 4, 6) so the righteous person is likewise to perform acts of piety in secret (v. 3). To emulate God in this way is to express the righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, which is required to gain entrance into the kingdom of heaven (5:20).<sup>7</sup>

#### FASTING IN ANTIQUITY AND IN SCRIPTURE

The words νῆστις, νηστεύω, and νηστεία refer to a person who has not eaten.<sup>8</sup> In antiquity virtually all religions practiced fasting. It was more popular among the Greeks than the Romans,<sup>9</sup> although in time it spread throughout the ancient world. The motives for fasting are interesting. In antiquity one prime motive was to ward off demons and evil forces. Some believed that a demon could enter the body through the

<sup>7</sup> Gottlob Schrenk notes that the righteousness demanded in Matthew is a gift from God closely associated with God’s kingdom and not based on merit as in Judaism (“δικαιοσύνη,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 2 [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964], 198–99).

<sup>8</sup> Johannes Behm, “νήστις, νηστεύω, νηστεία,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 4 (1967), 924–25.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 926.

eating of food. Therefore the ancients practiced fasting and avoided certain foods that were considered particularly dangerous.<sup>10</sup> The assumption was that if evil influences could be eliminated or minimized, a person could be in the state of ritual purity (ἀγνεία) necessary for communion with supernatural powers.<sup>11</sup>

A natural outgrowth of this idea was that fasting was a preparation for mantic activity. The ancients sought answers to the causes of natural and other calamities and two methods of divination developed. Cicero defined the two main types as *divinatio artificiosa* and *divinatio naturalis*.<sup>12</sup> Similarly Plato held to this twofold division when he distinguished between sane and insane methods of divination.<sup>13</sup> The sane method was the rational method of divination, whereas the insane method depended on frenzied activity and ecstatic utterances. The goal of each method was the same—a direct communication with the divine.<sup>14</sup>

In Judaism the motivation for fasting was similar. Fasting was practiced in connection with mourning the dead and with a belief in demons.<sup>15</sup> For example fasting as a means of preparing for divine communication and revelation is evident in [Exodus 34:28](#); [Deuteronomy 9:9](#); and [Daniel](#)

<sup>10</sup> R. Arberman, “Fasting and Prophecy in Pagan and Christian Antiquity,” *Traditio* 7 (1949): 6.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Cicero, *De Divinatione*, trans. William A. Falconer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964), 234–35.

<sup>13</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Harold N. Fowler (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953), 1:466–69.

<sup>14</sup> Arberman, “Fasting and Prophecy in Pagan and Christian Antiquity,” 9–11.

<sup>15</sup> Behm, “νήστις,” 927.

9:3; 10:2–3, 12.

Fasting was deeply rooted in the religious practices of Judaism, so much so that Gentiles associated fasting as one of the key markers of Judaism.<sup>16</sup> The only fast required by the Mosaic Law was on the Day of Atonement, a day of national repentance (Num. 29:7; Lev. 16:29; 23:27). During this twenty-four-hour period not even drinking water was permitted. The prescription for the violation of the fast was death. In addition after the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem, days were set aside for fasting and prayer during the fourth, fifth, seventh, and tenth months as a commemoration of this national disaster (Zech. 7:3, 5; 8:19).

Besides the prescribed fasts in the Old Testament national fasts could be called for calamities. In these fasts the people were expected to participate openly.<sup>17</sup> If someone refused, that signified that the national disaster had no meaning to the individual.<sup>18</sup> Such antisocial behavior was considered a flagrant religious offense. Obviously Matthew 6:16–18 does not deal specifically with the issue of public fasts but rather with voluntary fasts.

In Luke 18:12 a particularly strict Pharisee

<sup>16</sup> Tacitus wrote that the Jews fasted frequently (*History* 5.4). He understood that they fasted as a commemoration of the hunger they endured in the wilderness wanderings (*The Complete Works of Tacitus*, trans. Alfred Church and William Brodribb [New York: Random House, 1942], 659).

<sup>17</sup> In *Mishnah Ta’anith* 2.1c. the communal aspect of fasting is emphasized: “and each person puts ashes on his head” (Jacob Neusner, *The Mishnah* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988], 308).

<sup>18</sup> I. Abrahams, *Studies in Pharisaism and the Gospels* (New York: KTAV, 1967), 125.

stated in a self-righteous prayer that he fasted twice a week. The Yehidim (the pietists) fasted twice a week. *Didache* 8.1 specifies these days as Mondays and Thursdays. Probably the fasts in Matthew 6:16; Mark 2:18; Luke 18:12; and *Didache* 8.1 are referring to the exceptional fasts that took place primarily in the fall.<sup>19</sup> During the months of October and November the Yehidim would fast twice a week during periods of drought.<sup>20</sup> At the conclusion of the drought a general fast was called in which everyone was expected to participate. During this time, when fasting was not demanded but was regarded commendable, exceptional fasting became a mark of great spirituality. Jesus said that the priests who manifested great anguish in fasting were simply flaunting their piety to receive the praise of people (Matt. 6:16). In so doing they forfeited any eschatological reward for their fasting.

Pretentious displays of piety are often denounced in later rabbinic literature. The Code of Jewish Law states, “It is improper for a person to boast that he is fasting.”<sup>21</sup> This prescription was for private, not public, fasts.<sup>22</sup> Also at least in theory the public fast on the Day of Atonement

<sup>19</sup> After the destruction of the temple by the Romans private fasts became even more popular because they were viewed as a replacement for sacrifice (Behm, “*νῆστις*” 930).

<sup>20</sup> *Mishnah Ta’anith* 1.4a states that if “the seventeenth day of Marheshvan has come and rain did not fall, individuals began to fast a sequence of three fasts [Monday, Thursday, Monday]” (Neusner, *The Mishnah*, 308).

<sup>21</sup> “Shulchan Aruch” D. H. 565.6, [www.torah.org/advanced/shulchan-aruch/classes/orachchayim/chapter40.html](http://www.torah.org/advanced/shulchan-aruch/classes/orachchayim/chapter40.html) (accessed August 27, 2010).

<sup>22</sup> I. Abrahams, *Studies in Pharisaism and the Gospels*, 125.

was to be a joyous occasion.<sup>23</sup> However, in practice wearing sackcloth and sprinkling ashes on one's head were outward means of expressing sinfulness. Since rabbinic literature prohibits outward religious performances of the sort described in [Matthew 6:16–17](#), the text may not be a condemnation of the Pharisees specifically but rather a general critique of popular practices.

The Old Testament gives the same critique of fasting and the need for reform. [Isaiah 58:1–14](#) and [Jeremiah 14:12](#) sharply criticize the notion that fasting was a guarantee of divine favor. Fasting that pleases God involves a proper inner attitude as well as compassionate conduct ([Isa. 58:6–7](#)).<sup>24</sup>

[Matthew 6:16–18](#) follows in the prophetic tradition of criticizing popular religion and stating the need to reform. However, the issue is not one of reward versus nonreward (acceptance or nonacceptance by God) as in the Old Testament. In Matthew it is a question of *what kind* of reward will be received. Will people receive the reward of adulation from others in this temporal sphere, or will they receive the reward from God in the eschaton? This seems to be the central issue in Matthew. Also the emphasis in Matthew is on how the pious act is performed—outwardly for people to observe or secretly for God. Inner repentance is certainly implied, but it is not directly linked to fasting as in the Old Testament.

#### EXEGETICAL HIGHLIGHTS IN [MATTHEW 6:16–18](#)

Verse 16 describes the improper method of fasting. The hearers are warned not to look “gloomy.” The adjective *σκυθρωπός* (“gloomy”) derives from *σκυθρός*, which means “serious” or “sad-

<sup>23</sup> [Mishnah Ta’anith 4.8a](#).

<sup>24</sup> Cf. [Zechariah 7:5–10](#); [8:19](#); and [Jubilees 2:13](#).

looking.”<sup>25</sup> It describes an individual whose troubled mental state is easily detectable by facial expressions and general manner of appearance. Sometimes a sullen look is a genuine expression of a depressed state of mind. For example in Greek literature the word is used to describe a distraught, jealous worker whose work was not as good as that of a fellow worker.<sup>26</sup> The only other reference to *σκυθρωπός* used in this manner in the New Testament is [Luke 24:17](#). The two disciples traveling to Emmaus were *σκυθρωποί* (“sad-looking”) because they believed that their expectations of a messianic deliverer would never be realized.

However, the gloomy or saddened look can be an act or show that does not accurately portray inner feelings. Demosthenes wrote about a rich man who walked along with a sullen face, edging along a wall, so as not to be bothered by the more unfortunate and downtrodden. By looking gloomy he warded off requests from those who were in need. This demeanor, Demosthenes said, was a cloak to cover the man’s real character.<sup>27</sup> In [Matthew 6:16](#) the gloomy countenance is used in a manner similar to the above example because the gloom was not an expression of heartfelt contrition but was a means to display sanctimonious piety. Jesus labeled this kind of behavior as hypocritical (v. 16)<sup>28</sup> in the sense that those who fasted

<sup>25</sup> Werner Bieder, “*σκυθρωπός*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 7 (1971), 450.

<sup>26</sup> Papyri Zenon 59481.30, <http://ipap.csad.ox.ac.uk/4DLink/4Daction/IPAPwebquery?Pub=P.Cair.Zen. &v Vol=3> (accessed August 30, 2010).

<sup>27</sup> Demosthenes, *Private Orations against Stephanus I*, 45.68–69, trans. A. T. Murray (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 5:225–27.

in this way were concerned about their status with people, not God. Thus they failed to achieve the righteousness they assumed they had. Moreover, their reward was being recognized by people, not God.

A wordplay further highlights the conduct of the hypocrites. In their supposed anguish they made their faces invisible or unrecognizable (ἀφανίζουσιν) in order that they might be seen (φανῶσιν) by people. The picture Jesus painted was intended to be comical, yet tragic at the same time—comical in the sense of pointing out the extremes to which people go to gain applause and recognition, and tragic in the sense that the offenders will miss out on eschatological blessing. Thus the purpose of Jesus' teaching here in the Sermon on the Mount was to avert such presumptuous behavior by warning the disciples to watch out for their conduct and by reinforcing the proper manner to fast.

The right way to fast is stated in verses 17–18. Those who fast should forget about the adornments and spectacle of their pious act and conduct their fast in a way not obvious to others. By so doing their fasting will be rewarded in the eschaton. Instead of looking gloomy and sprinkling their distorted faces with ashes, they should anoint their heads<sup>29</sup> and wash their faces.

<sup>28</sup> The word “hypocrite” did not have a negative meaning in classical and Hellenistic literature. It originally meant “to interpret” or “to expound” and was used in connection with acting. The actor became the interpreter of the poet. In Hellenistic Judaism the word took on negative connotations. It essentially meant deception in the sense of opposition to God (Ulrich Wilckens, “ὕποκρι τίς,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 8 [1972], 566).

<sup>29</sup> Cf. [Judith 6:8](#). Here the anointing of the head is asso-

ciated with joy and festivity. Fasting, washing, and anointing can be viewed as preparations for temple entrance (John W. Welch, *The Sermon on the Mount in Light of the Temple* [Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009], 136).

They should prepare themselves as if they were invited to a banquet. This way no one but God would know they were fasting.

An underlying concept needs exploration. Three ideal types of persons existed in Judaism.<sup>30</sup> The first was the Talmid Hakham, the rabbinic scholar. These men were to study the Torah and its application to Jewish life. The second was the Zaddik, the righteous man. He was the ideal of the normal Jew, who faithfully sought to fulfill the Torah in his daily walk. The Zaddik could be described as a man of deeds rather than a man of words. At times he might stumble, but he never lost sight of his goal. The third type is the Hasid, who might be called the radical or nonconformist Jew. He did everything to extremes but always stayed within the influences of Jewish society.

Among the rabbis a distinction was made between Nistar (“concealed”) Zaddik and Mephursam (“famous”) Zaddik.<sup>31</sup> The Nistar Zaddik is particularly relevant to understanding [Matthew 6:16–18](#). The actions of the concealed one were meritorious and thus considered of a higher order than those of the Mephursam. They refused to exploit their piety, and therefore their deeds were done in secret. They hid them from others and also attempted to hide them from themselves as well. A popular legend, Lamed Vovniks,<sup>32</sup> says that the merit of the world rests

ciated with joy and festivity. Fasting, washing, and anointing can be viewed as preparations for temple entrance (John W. Welch, *The Sermon on the Mount in Light of the Temple* [Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009], 136).

<sup>30</sup> Gershom Scholem, “Three Types of Jewish Piety,” *Eranos Jahrbuch* 38 (1969): 331–47.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 346–47.

<sup>32</sup> According to rabbinic tradition Lamed Vovniks were

on the Nistar.

The Nistar Zaddik piety is certainly compatible with Jesus' teaching in 6:1–18. These verses do not depreciate the three acts of piety; instead they teach how these acts are to be performed. The Sermon on the Mount and Nistar Zaddik piety affirm that almsgiving, prayer, and fasting must be practiced in secret if true merit or reward is to be achieved.

Matthew's Gospel presents Jesus not as a radical revolutionary calling for the abolition of fasting but rather as someone calling for the reform of popular religious practices. However, in [Mark 2:18–22](#) the evangelist seems to have presented Jesus as advocating that fasting be laid aside as long as He, the bridegroom, was present with them. Does this contradict Matthew's teaching on fasting?

### MARK 2:18–22

John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and they came and said to Him, "Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?" And Jesus said to them, "While the bridegroom is with them, the attendants of the bridegroom cannot fast, can they? So long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day.

"No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; otherwise the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear results. No one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost and the skins as well; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins."

thirty-six individuals who faithfully trusted in God ([Isa. 30:18](#)) (Yirmiyahu Ullman, "Illuminating the Inner Lamed Vovnik," <http://www.rabbiullman.com> [accessed August 3, 2010]).

(2011). *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 168.

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## THE CONTEXT

Jesus and His disciples were eating at the house of Levi ([Mark 2:14](#)). The paraphrastic participle (ἦσαν ... νηστεύοντες) suggests that both John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees were fasting on that occasion (v. 18).<sup>33</sup> This prompted people to ask Jesus why His disciples did not fast. Jesus' reply was in the form of three short parables: the bridegroom, the old garment, and the new wine. Verses 18–22 are part of a series of conflict stories in which the Pharisees were the prime antagonists.<sup>34</sup>

## THE FASTING QUESTION

The question of why Jesus' disciples did not fast can be answered in two ways. One way is to say that Jesus' disciples did not fast because He was opposed to it. In other words Jesus rejected fasting as a means of expressing one's piety and as a valid religious act. This would mean that Jesus and His disciples made a radical break with the religious custom of Judaism. Another way is to say that Jesus and His disciples fasted at times such as the Day of Atonement, which was prescribed by the Law, but did not practice personal fasts. From the latter perspective the real ques-

<sup>33</sup> Technically the Pharisees did not have disciples, as Jesus and John the Baptist did; instead they had adherents (Ernest Lohmeyer, *Das Evangelium des Markus* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1951], 59). Matthew did not mention the Pharisees' disciples in his version of the fasting question ([Matt. 9:14–17](#)).

<sup>34</sup> "The pericope lies at the core of a concentric pattern of five conflict stories (2:1–3:6). Its relationship to the two surrounding stories (2:15–17, 23–28) comes through the common theme of Jewish praxis regarding eating/fasting" (Robert A. Guelich, *Mark 1–8:26* [Dallas: Word, 1989], 108).

tion is why the disciples did not do the extra fasts, that is, those not demanded by the Law. The latter perspective seems probable in view of the previous discussion on fasting where it was observed that nonparticipation in public fasts at times of national calamity or prescribed by the Law was tantamount to the rejection of Judaism itself.

John the Baptist's disciples thought that Jesus' disciples did not practice personal fasts as a means of gaining merit or as an expression of piety as the Pharisees and the disciples of John the Baptist did. The question put to Jesus by the disciples of John the Baptist could well have been answered on the basis of [Matthew 6:16–18](#). The disciples of Jesus fasted in secret so as not to be seen by others.

#### THE PARABLE OF THE BRIDEGROOM

In the parable of the bridegroom and the wedding guests in [Mark 2:19–20](#), a typical form critical position is that verses [19b–20](#) are a secondary development of [19a](#).<sup>35</sup> Verse [19a](#) is generally accepted as an authentic saying of Jesus or a church rule,<sup>36</sup> but verses [19b–20](#) are viewed as an expanded allegorization by the church. One major reason critics view verses [19b–20](#) as secondary is that they reflect a messianic consciousness. Key words such as νυμφίος (“bridegroom”) are thought to be allegorized in reference to Jesus being the messianic bridegroom. Also the verb ἀπαίρω (“taken away”) is used of Jesus' violent death as the Messiah. Kee's position is that verses [19–20](#) must be viewed as a unit.<sup>37</sup> His argument is basically theological.

<sup>35</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*, trans. John Marsh (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 19.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

(2011). *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 168.

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Verse [19a](#), “while the bridegroom is with them,” suggests that he will be taken away, which is stated more clearly in verse [20](#) by ἀπαίρω Kee concludes, “There is nothing in [19b](#) and [20](#) not already found in [19a](#).”<sup>38</sup> Also he raises a second argument of a practical nature and that is that verse [19a](#) does not constitute a more fitting answer to the question than verses [19b–20](#). He suggests that verses [19–20](#) are at best a tangential reply to the question in verse [18](#). Kee's arguments for the unity of verses [19–20](#) are essentially sound.

The form critical position assumes that verses [19b–20](#) were added by the early church to justify its fasting practices.<sup>39</sup> Ebeling disagrees and has suggested his own solution.<sup>40</sup> He believes that Jesus fasted but that the early Christian community did not fast. The early community created the pericope as a justification for why it did not fast. This justification was warranted, Ebeling suggests, because the community needed to defend why it broke not only with fasting but also with the entire legalistic system of Judaism. From Ebeling's perspective the community believed that it was already in the presence of the bridegroom and thus there was no need for fasting, which symbolized the old order. However, in the future, mourning and fasting would be appropriate.

Ebeling's conclusion that the early church

<sup>37</sup> Alistair Kee, “The Question about Fasting,” *Novum Testamentum* 11 (1960): 166.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Bultmann as well as other scholars accept this view, which was first suggested by Julius Wellhausen (Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*, 19 n. 4).

<sup>40</sup> H. J. Ebeling, “Die Fastenfrage,” *Theologische Studien und Kritiken* 108 (1937): 386–87.

community did not fast is unwarranted. As already observed, [Matthew 6:16–18](#) did not abolish fasting but, as suggested, was part of Jesus’ teaching on how fasting is to be properly performed. There is no question that the early Christian community around A.D. 50 practiced fasting. Fasting was practiced widely, as attested by Christian noncanonical writings. In addition [Acts 13:2–3](#) and [14:23](#) clearly indicate that the early Christian community did fast.

As already stated, the question in [Mark 2:18](#) reflects a real situation in the ministry of Jesus. In addition, it has been argued by some that verses [19–20](#) are a unit but are not a cogent answer to the question in verse [18](#). However, Jesus’ replies were penetrating, and they often put the question back to the original questioners.<sup>41</sup> This would suggest that the emphasis should be on the parable of the bridegroom and not on the question of fasting itself.

The original question posed by John’s disciples could have been answered by [Matthew 6:16–18](#). Again the issue in [Mark 2:18](#) was not that the disciples were opposed in principle to fasting but that they failed to do the extra fasts not demanded by the Law. So the intent of the question would be, “Why do Your disciples not practice voluntary fasts to show their piety?” Jesus, in agreement with Nistar Zaddik piety, could have emphasized the proper manner in which the fast is to be practiced, that is, in secret. Jesus and His disciples practiced voluntary fasts but not openly. Thus it is understandable that Jesus’ adversaries called Him a glutton and a drunkard in contrast to John, who “came neither eating or drinking” ([Matt. 11:18](#)).

<sup>41</sup> Kee, “The Question about Fasting,” 168. For examples see [Luke 10:25–37](#); [20:1–8](#), [20–26](#).

How then does [Mark 2:19–22](#) relate to the fasting question in verse [18](#)? Before proposing a solution, the position of Kee needs to be considered. He essentially agrees with the above conclusion that the question was originally posed by John’s disciples, and that [Matthew 6:16–18](#) forms a fitting reply. However, Kee handles the obvious disparity between that reply and the reply in [Mark 2](#) by assuming that the early church accepted the validity of the question of John’s disciples and therefore formulated its own reply in verses [19–22](#).<sup>42</sup> According to Kee the church essentially found itself in a dilemma. It practiced fasting, as [Didache 8.1](#) suggests, but the disciples did not fast or at least it was assumed they did not.

Kee’s solution is unacceptable since the answer of the early church would be in fundamental opposition with its own tradition about Jesus’ teaching on fasting in [Matthew 6:16–18](#).<sup>43</sup> Kee must assume that the early church was naïve to acknowledge that Jesus taught His disciples the proper way to fast but then to decide, after accepting the validity of John’s disciples’ question, that the disciples really did not fast. It makes better sense to view the answer Jesus gave to the fasting question as a means by which the early church understood that it was God’s new community in Christ. Viewed this way the question becomes secondary to the answer formulated in verses [19–22](#). This point must be explored further. To do so the work of J. O’Hara must be discussed.

O’Hara believes that verses [18–20](#) are original, that is, taught by Jesus. He deals with the form critical problems associated with verses [19b–20](#)

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>43</sup> It has been noted earlier that this teaching was widely attested in other noncanonical Christian writings.

by following the lead of Karl Schäfer.<sup>44</sup> O'Hara interprets the parable of the bridegroom in a way that erases the objections raised by some form critical scholars that verses 19b–20 are an allegorization of 19a. Affirming Schäfer's position, O'Hara does not view verses 19b–20 as an explicit passion prophecy. If they were a passion prophecy, that is, a reference to the Cross, the evangelist would have placed it after 8:27.<sup>45</sup> The bridegroom being "taken away" (2:20) must be viewed only in the sense of His not being with them. The central issue is the joy of His presence versus the sadness of His being absent, not an explicit reference to a passion prophecy. The scene depicted is one from everyday life where eating and drinking are subordinated to the joy of the presence of the bridegroom.

To heighten the central theme of joy and sadness, fasting in verses 19–20 must be viewed metaphorically. In fact the crux of the argument centers on the validity of understanding fasting metaphorically to mean sadness. Again for clarity's sake the position that Schäfer and O'Hara are advocating is that fasting in verse 18 should be taken literally but that the reference to fasting in verses 19–20 must be taken in the broader sense to mean sadness.

The justification for interpreting fasting in a broader metaphorical sense is that both νηστεύειν ("to fast") and πενθεῖν ("to mourn") are renderings of the Aramaic word translated "to be

sad" in the [Targum of 1 Kings 2:26](#), and "to fast" in the [Targum of Zechariah 7:5](#).<sup>46</sup> Because "to fast" and "to be sad" are translations of the same Aramaic word, each can have a broader range of meaning. Thus fasting in [Mark 2:19–20](#) can be understood in the wider sense of sadness because the bridegroom is no longer at the wedding. O'Hara makes a significant point which is essential for understanding the answer to the fasting question.

Further substantiation of O'Hara's position is seen in Matthew's parallel of [Mark 2:19](#). Matthew changed νηστεύειν ("to fast") to πενθεῖν ("to mourn") in [9:15](#). This suggests that Matthew was thinking of the bridegroom parable in terms of mourning and sadness at the removal of the bridegroom. Matthew's substitution of πενθεῖν for νηστεύειν is further justification for taking the references to fasting in [Mark 2:19–20](#) in the broader sense. With this understanding, the central theme of [Mark 2:18–22](#) is not fasting as such but is joy and sadness. The question of fasting becomes secondary to this main theme. Moreover, in the context verses [21–22](#) make better sense if they are viewed as heightening the joy that has been brought to Jesus' disciples by the presence of the bridegroom.<sup>47</sup> The early church

<sup>46</sup> J. Jeremias, "νηστεύειν," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 4 (1967), 1103 n. 41.

<sup>47</sup> R. T. France says, "There is nothing in the wording of vv. [21–22](#) to link them directly with the discussion of fasting. But they are well placed here, both in that they underline the sense of radical newness which v. [19](#) has expressed, and in that, placed here in the middle of the sequence of conflict stories, they sum up graphically the essence of contrast between the κήρυγμα of Jesus and the existing norms of Jewish religious life, even in their more progressive forms" (*The Gospel of Mark*, [Grand

<sup>44</sup> Karl Schäfer, "und dann werden sie fasten, an jenem Tage," in *Synoptische Studien*, Festschrift Alfred Wikenhauser (Munich: Karl Zink, 1953), 124–47.

<sup>45</sup> O'Hara correctly differs from Schäfer in that he does not rule out the possibility that Jesus Himself expected to die a violent death (J. O'Hara, "Christian Fasting," *Scripture* 19 [1967]: 91 n. 1).

community understood the radical newness of Jesus' teaching. Through Jesus' incarnation, death, and resurrection, God had acted decisively to create a new people to carry the plan of redemption.

#### SUMMARY

Jesus' disciples no doubt fasted, as indicated by [Matthew 6:16-18](#). The question of [Mark 2:18](#) assumes that Jesus' disciples were not doing the extra fasts as John's disciples and the Pharisees did. [Matthew 6:16-18](#) certainly would be a fitting reply to the fasting question, that is, Jesus' disciples did indeed fast but did so in secret. However, Jesus' answer does not fit the typical pattern in the Gospels. This indicates that the answer was not intended to be a direct answer to the fasting question. The question becomes secondary to the central issue, the joy of Jesus' presence with His disciples and the sadness at His departure. Mark's community understood the sadness of Jesus' departure (appropriate for fasting), but they also knew He had to depart in order for God's redemptive plan to be fulfilled. God's triumph in the Cross and the Resurrection established a new community in which the new had truly arrived through Jesus the Messiah.

Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002], 137).

(2011). *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 168.

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