

**A SOCIAL-SCIENTIFIC INTERPRETATION OF
FASTING IN THE NEW TESTAMENT AS A CRITICAL
ANALYSIS OF FASTING IN CONTEMPORARY
EVANGELICALISM**

Steven Hugh Mathews

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**Biblical and Religious Studies
Faculty of Human Sciences
University of Pretoria**

**Supervisor: Prof Ernest van Eck
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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Fasting is a nearly universal religious phenomenon. In almost every religious tradition, there is some connection drawn between intentional abstinence from food and a practitioner's spiritual development. Christian tradition draws from the Old Testament and New Testament, as well as the writings and traditions which have been handed down through two millennia of Christian faith and practice. Fasting, along with other ascetic disciplines such as silence and solitude, have often been neglected by the Western church, both Catholic and Protestant, and is not practiced on any appreciable scale today by any sect of Western Protestant Christianity.

A cursory reading of the gospels reveals that Jesus fasted at some times, and conspicuously refrained from fasting at others. Jewish religious leaders fasted. John the Baptist fasted, and Jesus gave instructions to His followers regarding fasting. In the book of Acts, one finds instances of group fasting in the early church. While fasting does not play a prominent role in the life of Jesus or the worship of the early church, it is nonetheless present, and worthy of a serious examination.

This study will seek to place the practice of fasting in the New Testament into its social and theological contexts. This study will ask questions such as:

- What did fasting mean in the first-century Mediterranean world?
- What were the social and religious implications of fasting?
- How was fasting linked to the religious institutions of Judaism, such as the temple, and the party of the Pharisees?
- How was fasting connected to the holiness of God, and man's striving after holiness?
- Why was fasting a source of conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees?
- When Jesus fasted, why did He do it?

- When Jesus and His disciples abstained from fasting when it might have been expected that they would do so, why did they not fast?
- How was fasting connected to the social realities of the first-century Mediterranean world, such as honor, shame, or one's relation to one's dyad?

Having asked these questions of the New Testament text, the goal will be to produce a broad, synthetic theology of fasting, and to arrive at an approach to fasting which concurs with the teaching and example of Jesus and His early followers. Then this study will examine contemporary trends in the theology and practice of fasting among Protestant Evangelical Christians. Does the evangelical church today possess a theology of fasting that arises from a sound interpretation of fasting in the New Testament? Does the church today fast in a way that Jesus criticized? How can the church today fast in a way that is compatible with the model and intent of fasting in the New Testament, though it finds itself in a cultural context that is foreign to that of the New Testament? These are the kinds of questions this study will attempt to answer.

1.2 METHODOLOGY

This Section will outline the methodology used to interpret the biblical texts and social context of fasting in the New Testament. While the New Testament documents are viewed by the author as the primary theological documents from which any authoritative view of the practice of fasting in the New Testament must be derived, these documents were not authored in a social vacuum, nor are they modern texts written in the context of twenty-first century Western culture. Rather, the authors of the New Testament (and, indeed, Jesus Himself) were mostly Eastern Jews, with an oriental religious heritage, living in a world which was philosophically influenced quite heavily by Greek thought, and dominated by Roman political and military power. These authors formulated their thoughts in, and expressed them to, a rapidly changing social dialectic in which East and West, Greek and Hebrew, Jew and Gentile interacted in such a way that new social paradigms were formed.

How should texts written in such a social and cultural milieu be properly interpreted by contemporary, English-speaking Western scholars? Van Eck provides perspective on one appropriate hermeneutical approach:

[W]hat is needed to study biblical texts – beyond the mere collection of independent historical and social data – is a way to investigate the interrelationship of ideas and communal behaviour, belief systems and cultural systems and ideologies as a whole, and the relationship of such cultural systems to a natural and social environment, economic organization, social structures and political power. In short, what is needed is a social-scientific analysis of texts.

(Van Eck 2001:595)

Social-scientific interpretation is the integration of social-scientific criticism and narrative criticism (Van Eck 2001:595). According to Van Eck, there are two foci of social scientific criticism. The first is the use of social science to construct ‘theories and models’ which provide insight into relevant aspects of early Christian culture in the context of ancient Mediterranean society. The second focus is that social scientific criticism attempts to articulate the ‘intended rhetorical effect’ of the biblical text in its social and cultural contexts.

The text is analysed as a vehicle of communication whose genre, structure, content, themes and aims are shaped by the cultural and social dynamics of the social system and the specific historical setting in which the text was produced and to which it constituted a specific response.

(Van Eck 2001:596)

In short, social scientific criticism aims to place the biblical text into the social context from which it arose, and to understand what the original author intended to communicate to the original audience.

Social scientific criticism attempts to get at the cultural and social assumptions behind the biblical text. As Malina notes, the social context in which the New Testament was written ‘was a high context society, with much of what they intended to communicate

totally absent from the text, yet rather firmly in place in the common social system into which they were socialized'¹ (1991:22).

At this point, it will be helpful to distinguish social-scientific criticism from a related and widely used paradigm, namely historical criticism. Historical criticism is an attempt to interpret the biblical text within its appropriate historical context. Historical criticism arose after the Enlightenment as a response to, and a guardian against, the abuses of allegorical interpretation and 'dogmatic distortion' (Neyrey 1991:xii) – the manipulation of the text to conform to previously held theological ideas – in other words, historical criticism was formulated to perform exegesis rather than eisegesis.

Barracough points out a few weaknesses he believes are inherent in historical criticism:

The first is that the historian's conceptualization tends to be implicit, arbitrary, and unsystematic, whereas the social scientist's is explicit and systematic. The second is that the historian's tendency, because his sources usually provide him with some sort of loose narrative pattern to which the facts can be related, is to evade so far as possible the theoretical issues, and also to deal for preference less with the underlying structure than with events and personalities, which are usually far more sharply delineated in historical records than in the materials anthropologists and sociologists commonly use.

(Barracough 1978:49-50)

Proponents of historical criticism may take issue with Barracough's description of historical analysis as 'implicit, arbitrary, and unsystematic', even as they recognize the limitations of the historical critical method. Corley, Lemke, and Lovejoy (2002) write that

historical criticism presupposes the view that Christianity is a history-based religion.... The New Testament interpreter has to take the bits of historical reference within the text, add to them the data available from other contemporary sources, and

¹ Elliott (1993:11) explains the difference between high and low context societies as follows: '[T]he New Testament ... consists of documents written in what anthropologists call a "high context" society where the communicators presume a broadly shared acquaintance with and knowledge of the social context of matters referred to in conversation or writing. Accordingly, it is presumed in such societies that contemporary readers will be able to "fill in the gaps" and "read between the lines"' (Elliott 1993:11). The main problem for modern readers of the Bible therefore is '*that we do not know what we do not know*. The sparse descriptions of context in the Bible often leave us without the essential ingredients for understanding the message' (Rohrbaugh 2006:567; emphasis in the original).

then attempt to reconstruct a history as a background to facilitate better understanding of the text itself.

(Corley *et al* 2002:151)

Of course, a truly objective historical analysis may be impossible, and epistemological certainty is not possible – the modern interpreter cannot truly enter the minds of the biblical authors nor their first-century audience. For this reason, historical criticism ‘often deals in historical probabilities rather than certainties’ (Corley *et. al.* 2002:51).

Nevertheless, historical criticism has proven to be useful for interpreting biblical texts, and has become a widely used approach.

Historical-critical scholars also have criticisms of the social scientific approach; specifically, that social scientific criticism imposes modern sociological paradigms on the New Testament text (Corley *et. al.* 2002:151). Just as the historical-critical scholar runs the risk of applying historical insight selectively or arbitrarily, so also the social-scientific critic may impose his or her own social constructs on to the New Testament text, thereby producing a biased interpretation. An example of this may perhaps be found in various expressions of liberation theology, which views the text primarily from the sociological viewpoint of an oppressed people group, and places primary emphasis on social justice. ‘Theological themes have been developed in the Latin American context that have served as models for other theologies of liberation’ (Elwell 1991:280).

Liberation theology frequently employs the social-scientific method (Corley *et. al.* 2002:151), which has given rise to the criticism that

liberation theology’s weakness stems from an application of misleading hermeneutical principles and a departure from the historic Christian faith. Liberation theology rightly condemns a tradition that attempts to use God for its own ends but wrongly denies God’s definitive self-disclosure in biblical revelation.

(Elwell 1991:280)

The purpose here is not to provide a substantive critique of liberation theology, but to point out that the social-scientific critical method contains as much risk as the historical-critical method. Just as the historical-critical scholar may arbitrarily select and apply

historical data to the text which skews his or her interpretation, so also the social-rhetorical critic may impose foreign social constructs on the first century Mediterranean world, and produce a culturally-conditioned theology or reading of the text.

Of course, it would not be wise to assert that there is only one valid hermeneutical approach to the New Testament. The genre and context of different passages call for different approaches to interpretation. For some texts, the historical-critical method is quite appropriate. Take, for example, Paul's confrontation of Peter, recorded in Galatians 2:11-14. The historical context of this encounter provides a key to interpreting it. If this event occurred after the Jerusalem Council, recorded in Acts 15, then Peter's hypocrisy is on full display, and Paul's confrontation makes perfect sense in light of the verdict of the council. However, if this event occurred before the Jerusalem Council met and formulated a theology of Jewish/Gentile relations within the early church, then new interpretive difficulties emerge within the text, as Peter would not have been under any public mandate to accept Gentiles in Christian fellowship. In this example, the historical setting of the text is an important key to its interpretation.

Elliot (2011) asserts that the social-scientific method is not distinct from, but rather, is a subset of, historical criticism:

Social-scientific criticism (SSC) is a subdiscipline of exegesis, not a new or independent methodological paradigm. It complements the other subdisciplines of the historical-critical method (text criticism, literary criticism, rhetorical criticism and the like) by bringing social scientific scrutiny to bear both on texts and on their geographical, historical, economic, social, political and cultural (including 'religious') contexts. The questions it addresses to these twin objects of analysis and the tools of its investigation are those of the social sciences, especially of sociology and cultural anthropology.

(Elliot 2001:1)

The social-scientific approach is particularly appropriate for the current study, as fasting in the New Testament was a personal and a social phenomenon, rather than merely an historical event. As the proposed study will indicate, people fasted for a variety of purposes, related to their practice of Judaism, their anticipation of the coming Messiah, and a variety of other reasons. These are social, cultural, and religious factors, rather

than historical factors, so a broad, deep understanding of the relevant social institutions will be helpful in rightly interpreting these texts and applying them to contemporary Evangelical Christianity. A more detailed account of social-scientific criticism, including its history, basic principles, methods, and applicability to this study will be provided in Chapter 2 of this study.

This study will implement social-scientific criticism to provide scenarios for interpreting texts in the New Testament regarding the theology and practice of fasting. The primary documents will be the gospels and Acts. These writings will be interpreted in their socio-historical contexts, with the purpose of answering the questions articulated at the end of the previous Section of this chapter, and others similar.

To get at an answer to these questions, this study will begin by examining the practice of fasting in the cultures which gave rise to the Mediterranean society of Christ and the early church: specifically, fasting in Old Testament Judaism will be examined, as will the practice of fasting in Greek and Roman cultures. In addition to the practice of fasting, social and cultural attitudes toward food in general will be examined. Then, specific New Testament texts relevant to fasting will be interpreted with an eye to their social-scientific context. Next, from these interpretations, a synthetic theology of Christian fasting will be articulated. Finally, the author will attempt to juxtapose this synthetic theology of fasting against the theology of fasting articulated by contemporary (1968 to the present) Evangelical authors, seeking points of compatibility, and will articulate a proposed reconciliation for conflicts which exist between the two. Evangelicals often fast for reasons different than those found in the Bible, and expect different outcomes from their fasting. This follows from the fact that Evangelicals practice fasting with a different set of social realia than those operative in the gospels. However, the gospels and Acts provide a paradigm for reconciling Evangelical fasting and biblical fasting. This paradigm of reconciliation is presented in Chapter 6 of the present study.

1.3 RESEARCH HISTORY

Fasting played a minor, but important, role in the social and spiritual life of Jesus. Jesus fasted, He taught about fasting in the Sermon on the Mount and other public discourses, and discussed fasting with followers of other Jewish sects. Because of this, many of Jesus Christ's early disciples fasted, and many theologians, from the time of the church fathers, discussed the theology and practice of fasting in their writings. The purpose of this Section is to provide a brief *Forschungsgeschichte*; a research history of Christian fasting. Of course, such a review is not comprehensive or exhaustive, but is intended to sketch broad themes found in early Christian (second and third-generation Christians who learned their faith and practice from the apostles) interpretations of fasting, as well as fasting in contemporary evangelicalism. Contemporary popular discussions of fasting will be reviewed, with the goal of outlining the main streams of thought which have influenced the contemporary evangelical approach to fasting. These are explored in more detail in Chapter 5. Finally, contemporary academic treatments of fasting will be surveyed.

1.3.1 Early Christian documents

The *Didache*, or *Teachings of the Twelve Apostles*, is a collection of very early instructions on worship and Christian practice. The *Didache* describes fasting before baptism, encouraging both the baptizer and the baptismal candidate to fast for two days before baptism, and admonishes those who fast to avoid hypocrisy (Did 7.4; Ante-Nicene Fathers, 1:379).

The *Didache* (1.3) also encourages Christians to fast and pray for their enemies. In the midst of persecution, Christians are called upon not to fast for deliverance, but for the salvation of their persecutors.

The Epistle of Ignatius to Hero, a deacon of Antioch, encourages fasting, along with prayer, in moderation: '... but not beyond measure, lest thou destroy thyself thereby.' (Ante-Nicene Fathers 1:218) Another early epistle, *The Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus*, describes fasting in the context of Judaism as 'scrupulosity' and

‘superstition’, connecting fasting to new moon observances. Fasting, along with other Judaic observances, are described as ‘act(s) of folly (rather than) of divine worship’ (*Ante-Nicene Fathers* 1:56).

Polycarp takes a more reverent view of fasting in his epistle to the Philippians, linking prayer and fasting together as part of the Christian practice which was handed down from the apostles. Polycarp sees fasting as a response to the weakness of the flesh in temptation, and as a basic aspect of Christian holiness (*Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:72).

Perhaps the first detailed theological discussion of fasting, as opposed to references to fasting simply as a practice to be embraced or eschewed, is found in Ignatius. In his *Epistle to Mary* at Neapolis, near Zarus, he describes various types of Christ found in the Old Testament. In a chapter titled ‘Fasting, and the goat sent away, were types of Christ’, Ignatius draws a link between the scapegoat of Leviticus 16, the practice of fasting, and the person of Jesus Christ. He gives a detailed analysis of the obvious comparisons between the goat and Christ. Less obvious is the connection with fasting. Ignatius’ connection of fasting to the Levitical scapegoat, as a type of Christ, seems to be based in a misunderstanding of scripture. Ignatius writes ‘What, then, says He in the prophet? ‘And let them eat of the goat which is offered, with fasting, for all their sins.’ (*Ante Nicene Fathers* 1:261). However, the text in Leviticus on which Ignatius bases his comparison, mandates that the goat be burned in its entirety: ‘But the bull of the sin offering and the goat of the sin offering, whose blood was brought in to make atonement in the holy place, shall be taken outside the camp, and they shall burn their hides, their flesh, and their refuse in the fire. Then the one who burns them shall wash his clothes and bathe his body with water, then afterward he shall come into the camp’ (Lv 16:27-28). Therefore, Ignatius’s comparison of fasting in the context of the Levitical scapegoat seems not to have merit in the context of the original practice of scapegoating, but it is significant as perhaps the attempt to place fasting into the context of a sound Christology.

Justin Martyr relates the practice of fasting to Christian baptism, and urges, as does the *Didache*, that both baptismal candidates and those baptizing them should fast and pray in preparation for baptism. In his *First Apology* (61), he writes:

As many as are persuaded and believe that what we teach and say is true, and undertake to be able to live accordingly, are instructed to pray and to entreat God with fasting, for the remission of their sins that are past, we praying and fasting with them. Then they are brought by us where there is water, and are regenerated in the same manner in which we were ourselves regenerated.

(Ante-Nicene Fathers, 1. 336)

A review of the Church Fathers on fasting leads the reviewer to the conclusion that there was not a single, unified position on fasting in the days of the early believers. In fact, Musurillo (1956) surveyed patristic literature about fasting, and discussed nine fasting emphases in the Church Fathers. These are:

- *examples*, positive and negative, of fasting from church history;
- *philosophical motifs*, which relate Pythagorean, Neo-Platonic, and Stoic philosophies to the relationship between the body and the soul, and further, to fasting;
- *hygienic fasting*, which was presumed to promote physical health;
- *a demonic motif*, which relates fasting to spiritual warfare against spiritual evil;
- *fasting as mourning over sin* – both their own, and Adam’s original sin;
- *abnormality in fasting*, such as competitive fasting, or unusual fasting practices;
- *spiritual fasting*, which was done for spiritual formation and character development;
- *fasting as self-conquest*, or as a means of producing discipline and self-control; and
- fasting as a form of *asceticism and symbolic martyrdom*.

Berghuis (2011) summarizes the early Church Fathers’ view of fasting as follows:

Fasting must be humble, and it is secondary to deeds of justice for one’s neighbor. It is formally associated with church rituals like baptism and the station fasts, and these are done for the spiritual purposes of purification and combating the flesh.

These kinds of actions please God, and he will bless those who do them from a sincere heart.

(Berguis 2011)

Rufe also provides an analysis and summary of ancient Christian texts on fasting:

These early Christian texts show Christians fasting to prepare for baptism, to mourn and commemorate Jesus' death (for many their only routine practice of fasting as a ritual act of lamentation), to better resist temptation, to obtain revelation, as part of their observance of stations, in response to persecution, and to care for the poor and address community needs and support community goals. This fasting practice, in addition to being separate and distinctive, reflected two strongly-held convictions: (1) because Christians were living in an age of joy inaugurated by their risen Lord, fasting routinely practiced as a ritual act of lamentation was no longer appropriate behavior; and (2) because God's demands that justice and righteousness be done were primary, fasting was acceptable to God only when or as those demands were also met.

(Rufe 1994:iii)

1.3.2 Contemporary Evangelicalism

The resurgence of interest in fasting among Evangelicals seems to correspond to publication of the widely popular book *Celebration of discipline*, by Richard Foster in 1978. Foster indicated that in his research he could not find a book written about fasting in English between 1861 and 1954, indicating a general lack of interest in the subject during the Industrial Revolution. In the late 1970s, however, he stated that 'a renewed interest in fasting has developed' (Foster 1978:47). Foster believes that fasting fell out of favor among Christians because of the 'excessive ascetic practices' of Medieval Christianity. Because of this, he believes that modern culture 'tends to confuse fasting with mortification' (1978:47).

Foster's brief treatment of fasting first addresses the question of whether fasting is obligatory for the Christian. Foster summarizes several New Testament texts, stating that Jesus assumed that people would fast, but that He did not command them to do so. He states that Jesus anticipated that His followers would fast during the time between His resurrection and His *parousia* (1978:52-53).

Foster also addresses the priority of motive in fasting, which should center on devotion to Christ: 'Physical benefits, success in prayer, the enduing of power, spiritual insights – these must never replace God as the center of fasting.... That is the only way we will be saved from loving the blessing more than the Blessor' (1978:55). Foster summarizes fasting thus: 'Fasting helps us to keep our balance in life. How easily we begin to allow nonessentials to take precedence in our lives. How quickly we crave things we do not need until we are enslaved by them' (1978:56).

Arthur Wallis wrote *God's chosen fast* in 1969, nine years prior to Foster's text, but it did not have the wide acclaim and popularity of Foster's book. Foster quoted Wallis at length, thus introducing many evangelicals to Wallis' thoughts on fasting. *God's chosen fast* remains to this day perhaps the most comprehensive popular handbook on the subject of fasting. In it, Wallis summarizes fasting to different extents (normal fasting, partial fasting, and absolute fasting), private and public fasting, and various biblical purposes for fasting. In this latter approach, Wallis was followed by Elmer Towns in 1996, in his book *Fasting for spiritual breakthrough: A guide to nine Biblical fasts*. In this volume, Towns summarizes the fasts of nine Old and New Testament characters, including the reason for their fasts, and the manner of their fasting. So, for example, Paul is said to have fasted for 'insight and decision-making', while Esther fasted for 'protection against the evil one' (Towns 1996). Elmer Towns and Bill Bright (founder of Campus Crusade for Christ), promoted a prayer and fasting initiative in the mid-1990s, and Towns' book and audio cassettes of his teaching were widely promoted on the *Old time gospel hour* television program, and through Liberty University, which exposed Towns' thought to a large population of evangelical Christians, many of whom were preparing for pastoral ministry, in the United States.

A final popular treatment of fasting deserves mention: Donald Whitney's *Spiritual disciplines for the Christian life*. Published in 1991, and widely distributed by The Navigators, an organization committed to promoting Christian discipleship, this book has become quite influential among evangelical Christians. Whitney writes:

Christians in a gluttonous, denial-less, self-indulgent society may struggle to accept and to begin the practice of fasting. Few disciplines go so radically against the flesh and the mainstream of culture as this one. But we cannot overlook its biblical significance ... most of us dare not overlook fasting's benefits in the disciplined pursuit of a Christlike life.

(Whitney 1991:160)

Whitney goes on to discuss at length these 'benefits': fasting strengthens prayer, invites God's guidance, expresses grief and repentance, seeks the protection or deliverance of God, produces humility, expresses concern for the Kingdom and work of God, overcomes temptation, and is an act of worship (Whitney 1991:161-177). A more detailed literature review of contemporary fasting literature is found in Chapter 5 of the present study.

The common thread among influential authors and promoters of fasting among contemporary Evangelical Christians is a view of fasting in a cause-and-effect relationship: fasting in certain ways, or with certain motives, produces particular results in the life of a believer. Usually, biblical characters are imitated, with the view that their fasting was calculated to produce the results which followed. The miraculous instances of divine intervention in the cases of, for example, Esther and Daniel, are assumed to be the direct result of the act of fasting, and it is further assumed that these acts of providence are replicated in the lives of Christians today (to one degree or another) through the act of fasting. An illustration of this view of fasting may be found in another book by Elmer Towns, published in 1998. After his emphasis on fasting had taken hold among evangelicals, Towns assembled testimonies of prominent Christians who had engaged in fasting and seen dramatic movements of God which were externally visible – healing from diseases, church growth, answered prayer, et cetera. A passage from the book summarizes this cause-and-effect mentality about fasting:

You can make a difference by fasting, because when you make a vow to seek God and pray, you can turn around circumstances. Just as Al Henson refused to submit to circumstances, you can fast to change your circumstances.

(Towns 1998:31)

It is this study's contention that such an anthropocentric view of fasting has become prevalent among Evangelical Christians – fasting is seen as a tool to bring about specific results which the Christian finds desirable in his or her personal circumstances. This study assumes that if fasting in the New Testament is interpreted in its social-scientific context, this view of fasting will not be found among Jesus and His early followers.

Indeed, although this approach to fasting is prevalent in popular contemporary evangelical literature, it is not the only view. Dallas Willard presents a much more broad-based and less reactionary view of fasting:

[F]asting is one of the more important ways of practicing that self-denial required of *everyone* who would follow Christ. In fasting, we learn how to suffer happily as we feast on God.... Persons well used to fasting as a systematic practice will have a clear and constant sense of their resources in God. And that will help them endure deprivations of *all* kinds...

(Willard 1990:167; emphasis in the original)

From this cursory view of contemporary Evangelical literature on fasting, it seems that a more comprehensive popular theology of fasting is needed – one which places fasting in its social, theological, and canonical contexts, and which goes beyond mere imitation and causality, to a biblical understanding of fasting in the context of the broader Christian life. Providing steps toward such a theology is the goal of the present study.

1.3.3 Contemporary scholarship

Of course, others have made contributions toward such a goal. Curtis Mitchell's article in the October 1990 edition of the Evangelical journal *Bibliotheca Sacra* attempts to answer the question 'is religious fasting a legitimate practice for today?' Mitchell examines key fasting texts² in the New Testament, and concludes that

Fasting then is a legitimate response to dangers, trials, heartaches, or sorrows... In times of physical or spiritual need Christians realize their inadequacy and in humility and repentance look to the Lord. These emotions may be demonstrated by private

² Mitchell examines the texts in the following order: Luke 2:37, Matthew 4:1-11, Mark 1:12-13 Lk 4:2, Matthew 6:16-18, Matthew 9:14-17, Mark 2:18-22, Luke 5:33-39, Acts 9:8-11, Acts 13:1-3, and Acts 14:23.

fasting. On the other hand, if there is no felt need of a serious nature, fasting does not seem to be required of believers.

(Mitchell 1990:469)

Joseph F. Wimmer's *Fasting in the New Testament: A study in Biblical theology* was published in 1982, and provided a book-length treatment of fasting with many of the same goals as the present study, albeit not from the vantage point of a social-scientific hermeneutic. In explaining his goal, he writes:

To my knowledge there is no extensive study on fasting that considers all the New Testament texts in light of contemporary literary criticism and hermeneutics in order to arrive at a synthesis of the Christian biblical teaching on fasting. This work is meant to fill that gap.

(Wimmer 1982:1)

Thus it is apparent that Wimmer's text shares the goal, but not the interpretive method, of the present study. Wimmer approaches fasting not from the perspective of an Evangelical, but that of a Roman Catholic.

Wimmer's work is a response to the resurgence of interest in fasting stimulated by the writing of Wallis and Foster in the 1960s and 1970s. Wimmer writes that a basic flaw in the approach of his contemporaries to the subject of fasting is a lack of rigorous, critical hermeneutics:

Most of these books and articles include a consideration of biblical text from the Old and New Testaments, but the passages are often merely cited and treated superficially, and not rarely from a fundamentalistic point of view. At the same time professional biblical studies have become highly complex, with an emphasis on the historico-critical, and now redactional, methods of research, and have given insufficient attention to the hermeneutical aspects of their work.

(Wimmer 1982:1)

To correct these perceived flaws, Wimmer proposes to study fasting from a form-critical perspective, to determine and explore 'its place in the kerygma of the apostolic community, especially as indicated by its literary genre and *Sitz im Leben* (Wimmer 1982:2),' as well as its relationship to the historical Jesus, and its function in the

redaction in which it appears. Wimmer articulates four principles which guide his interpretation of fasting in the New Testament. Agreeing with Wilhelm Dilthey's definition of hermeneutics as 'the art of arriving at the understanding of life expressed in a written text (see Dilthey 1924:317-338),' Wimmer's first principle is that 'Fasting is an expression of life; a study of biblical texts which treat of it should disclose to us various aspects of that life' (1982:3).

Wimmer then asserts that associations connected with a reality, such as fasting, form part of the meaning of that reality. This is a sentiment with which social-scientific critics can agree. This gives rise to Wimmer's second principle: 'Fasting is a human reality, and therefore has a meaning which is one of its constitutive parts. Christian fasting is thus different from other kinds of fasting, but the many associations connected with it also form part of its meaning' (1982:4).

Wimmer claims that Christian fasting is a concrete act with associations to other forms of fasting, but that it is not merely concrete – it also carries a symbolic function in its Christian context. Therefore 'the biblical texts on fasting have a symbolic dimension and should bring us to a better self-understanding in all our essential relationships, toward ourselves, others, the world, and God' (1982:5). This is his third principle.

Wimmer's final principle attempts to connect the interpretation of fasting in the New Testament with the experience and maturity of the interpreter: 'The more profound, experienced, and developed our own personalities, the greater will be our understanding of the true meaning of fasting' (Wimmer 1982:6). Thus, Wimmer proceeds on the assumption that the task of interpreting New Testament texts on fasting consists of placing fasting not only into the context of the first-century Mediterranean world, and of the literary forms in which it is presented in the New Testament, but also into the context of fasting in general and of other Christian symbols. Finally, a deep understanding of fasting comes not only from understanding the associations in the biblical text, but in applying them through a profound and experienced personality – that

is, forming one's own associations which link fasting in the New Testament to Christian fasting today.

Perhaps the most comprehensive study of fasting in recent years is a doctoral dissertation written by Kent Berghuis, titled *Christian fasting: A theological approach*. Written for the Ph.D. at Trinity International University, a significant Evangelical institution, Berghuis' research develops an integrative theology of fasting from an Evangelical Christian perspective. Berghuis' research examines every reference to fasting in the Old Testament and New Testament, and attempts to construct a theology of fasting which is applicable to contemporary Evangelical Christianity in the United States. In its aim and goals, Berghuis' research is in some ways similar to the current study. The primary distinction is that the current study employs the social-scientific approach, and places primary emphasis on the New Testament. Berghuis also provides an English translation of sermons on fasting by Basil, which makes a contribution to the field of patristic theology.

1.4 OBJECT AND CONTRIBUTION OF STUDY

The objective of this study is to explore the practice of fasting in the New Testament, placing this practice into its socio-historical, cultural, and hermeneutical contexts; to formulate a synthetic theology of fasting within contemporary Evangelical Christianity; and to juxtapose New Testament fasting and contemporary Evangelical fasting, seeking reconciliation between the two. To the author's knowledge, there is no written body of work which examines fasting in the New Testament from a social-scientific perspective, and attempts to reconcile fasting in the New Testament with contemporary Evangelical fasting, making the present study a unique and original contribution.

1.5 THESIS

The thesis to be proven in the study is the following: Evangelical fasting conforms to the *ethos* of the gospel as presented in the New Testament, and thus is a valid expression of biblical Christianity.

1.6 THEOLOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS AND POINTS OF DEPARTURE

In any attempt at exegesis, the interpreter brings to the hermeneutical task a set of assumptions which are not justified by the study, but rather, are foundational to it. These theological presuppositions form the necessary intellectual and epistemological structure upon which the exegete builds his interpretation of the Scripture. The author brings several theological assumptions to the present study. Justification of these assumptions is beyond the scope of this study; nevertheless, these assumptions are sketched in broad terms below.

The starting point and the *telos* of Christian theology are the person of God as revealed in Scripture. J. I. Packer defines theology as ‘confessing truth and discerning God,’ and goes on to say:

Theology is an activity before it’s a set of conclusions. It’s the activity that yields the conclusions. It’s something that you do. It’s an activity of thinking and speaking about God in relation, on the one hand, to the church’s confession... Theology is the discipline whereby the church tests and, where necessary, corrects, adjusts, and expands the proclamation that it’s been making up to this point. Theology is concerned about what’s true. Theology is also a matter of thinking and speaking about God in relation to the world’s condition.... Theology then takes on the character of wisdom and vision.... Theology becomes the activity in which every Christian shares as he or she gives witness to Christ, and certainly the activity in which every pastor shares every time he stands or she stands in the pulpit preaching. It’s the activity of pointing and saying, ‘Look! Can you see God? This is your God. Let me tell you about Him. Keep looking, and by His grace you will see Him for yourself.’

(Packer 1996)

This study begins with the central theological presupposition of Christian theism – the objective reality of the existence of God. A philosophical proof of the existence of God lies outside the scope of this study, though the veracity of many such proofs is assumed. The theological presuppositions of this study place it into the context of both a *priori* arguments for the existence of God (i.e., the moral argument, the ontological argument) and a *posteriori* arguments (i.e., the cosmological and teleological arguments). Simply, put, this study assumes the objective existence of God, outside of human experience or the biblical text. God is not an idea or a textual construction, but an ontological Being. God *is*.

From the *a priori* assumption that God is, this project moves to the scriptural conclusion that 'He is a rewarder of those who seek Him' (Heb 11:6). From this starting point of orthodox theism, the study operates under the assumption that God interacts with humanity, that He, in the words of the Heidelberg Catechism,

still upholds, as it were by his own hand, heaven and earth together with all creatures, and rules in such a way that leaves and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and unfruitful years, food and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, and everything else, come to us not by chance but by his fatherly hand.

(Heidelberg Catechism, Sunday 10, Question 27)

God created humanity in His image, intending that His creation should 'enjoy God' and 'glorify Him forever' (Westminster Catechism, Question 1). To this end, God gave His creation certain of His communicable attributes, such as intelligence, emotion, and volition. Herschel Hobbs has written: 'This divine image means that God created man with a rational, emotional, and moral nature' (Hobbs 1998:43-44) The opening narratives of the Pentateuch reveal God's purposes for humanity – that they should procreate (Gn 1:28), enjoy provision of staple needs (Gn 1:29-31³), appreciate the beauty of God's created order (Gn 2:9), act as stewards of God's creation (Gn 2:15), obey God (Gn 2:16-17) and experience His presence (Gn 3:8), and live in human community (Gn 2:18-25). These assumptions are relevant to an interpretation of fasting as an act of Christian devotion, as an 'understanding of life', to echo Wimmer above, and as social behavior in the New Testament.

This study also proceeds from the assumption of human depravity – that though humanity was created for relationship with God, this relationship is tainted by the reality of sin. Charles Hodge explains the consequences of the fall thus:

The effects of sin upon our first parents themselves were (1) shame, a sense of degradation and pollution, and (2) dread of the displeasure of God, or a sense of guilt and a consequent desire to hide from His presence. These effects were unavoidable. They prove the loss not only of innocence but of original righteousness, and with it the favour and fellowship of God.

³ Unless otherwise noted, scripture references taken from the New American Standard Bible.

(Hodge 1988:274)

The continuing effect of the fall of humanity is evident in humanity today as well. Humans are sinners by nature, having inherited corruption from the first persons, and by choice (Rm 3:23).

God's solution to the destruction caused by human sin is Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is held to be the second person of the Trinity, the eternal Son of the Father. He is 'very God of very God.' An orthodox, biblical Christology provides a perspective from which to view Christ in the scheme of corruption and redemption, which is essential to the present study of fasting in the New Testament.

Jesus Christ is fully God and fully man (Col 2:9). Donald Bloesch correctly asserts: 'While the New Testament indeed teaches the divinity of Christ, it also insists on his true humanity' (Bloesch, 1997, 55). The hypostatic union of two natures in one person, entirely divine and entirely human, puts Christ in the position of mediator between God and humanity (Heb 9:15). As God, he has condescended to humanity through his incarnation (Phlp 2:6-8) and atoning death (Rm 5:11), and the resurrection. As a sinless man, he has fulfilled the righteous requirements of the law (Mt 5:17). He alone is in a position to be an advocate to the Father for fallen humanity (1 Tm 2:5). Since Jesus Christ is depicted in the New Testament as fasting, as conspicuously abstaining from fasting, and as teaching about fasting, this belief in His full divinity and full humanity is relevant to the current study.

God's plan of redemption does not end with the bodily resurrection and ascension of Christ. In Christ's physical absence from the earth, He has sent the Holy Spirit to indwell believers and to convict the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment. The Holy Spirit is a gift from God to all regenerate persons, and imparts all regenerate persons with gifts to the church, as God is pleased to dispense them.

Christ is represented on earth by his church. The church is composed of regenerate, baptized believers who carry on Christ's witness and his ordinances until He returns.

The church has been commissioned by Christ to make disciples in His power, and to initiate these disciples meaningfully into lives of obedience to Christ. This initiation into Christian discipleship is relevant to the practice of fasting, and therefore, to the present study.

The written record of God's revelation of himself to humanity is the Bible, which records the history and future of God's interaction with humanity for the purposes of creation and redemption. The Bible is a reliable record of God's truth. Thus, in interpreting selected New Testament passages which relate to the practice and theology of fasting, this study will seek to determine God's revelation about fasting for His church, in the social and historical contexts in which God was pleased to reveal Himself.

This brief theological sketch provides the basis for a few foundational points of departure for this study. These are

- That Jesus Christ's primary emphasis is the redemption of humanity from the fall, and restoration of humanity to fellowship with God.
- That the teaching and witness of Jesus Christ support his emphasis on redemption, that is, if Jesus teaches His followers to fast, then fasting is thus related to the redemptive work of God through Jesus Christ. If Jesus Christ's followers practiced fasting, then they understood fasting to be a significant practice in imitation of Christ or in obedience to His teachings.
- That the New Testament provides a reliable account of the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, and the theology and practice of the early church. Any true understanding of Christian fasting must begin with the New Testament text.
- That the spiritual practices of Christ and his followers have relevance for the church today, unless there is significant reason to believe otherwise, due to the continuing ministry of Christ through the Holy Spirit. God is active in the spiritual disciplines, such as fasting, which contribute to the redemption of humanity.
- That the study of biblical spiritual disciplines, such as fasting, is thus worthwhile to the Christian.

- That an exegetical study of the New Testament should constitute a rigorous attempt at scholarship, in a spirit of humility and piety. It is in this spirit that the author proceeds.

1.6 OUTLINE OF STUDY

Above, the goals and objectives of the present study were articulated. The research questions were formulated, and were placed into context. The methodology of the present study was explained, and a justification was provided for the use of social-scientific criticism to interpret fasting in the New Testament. A research history was presented which summarized fasting in the early church (the historically immediate followers of Jesus) and in contemporary Evangelicalism. Summaries of recent scholastic treatments of fasting were presented as well. The present study's uniqueness and contribution to broader scholarship were asserted, and the author's theological assumptions were articulated.

Chapter 2 of the present study provides a detailed examination of social-scientific criticism, including its basic definition, its assumptions and models, and goals. Social realia which are representative of the models used by social-scientific critics are examined, including honor and shame, individuality and collectivism, kinship, and limited good and its sequela, envy. The historical development of social-scientific criticism is briefly sketched, as well as categories of literature which have contributed to social-scientific criticism. Prominent authors in the social-scientific school are surveyed, and the state of social-scientific criticism today is articulated. Finally, social-scientific criticism is placed into the context of seven other approaches to hermeneutics: historical criticism, source criticism, form criticism, redaction criticism, narrative criticism, postmodernist criticism, and feminist criticism. It is argued that social-scientific criticism is an appropriate methodology for interpreting fasting in the New Testament.

Chapter 3 examines fasting in the cultures which contributed to the cultural and social context of the first-century Mediterranean world. The nearly universal nature of religious fasting is demonstrated, and religious fasting is placed into the context the collectivism

of the ancient cultures under review. Attitudes toward food in the ancient world are briefly described. Fasting in the Old Testament is examined through interpretation of significant fasting texts. These texts are representative, rather than comprehensive, of fasting texts in the Old Testament, and demonstrate the broad scope of meaning which fasting may carry in the Old Testament. Fasting is also discussed in the broader Mesopotamian context, as well as fasting in secular and religious Greek and Roman societies.

Chapter 4 tackles the problem of attempting a social-scientific interpretation of fasting in the New Testament. It begins with an overview of fasting in the first-century Mediterranean world from a social-scientific perspective, discussing ritualized and non-ritualized fasting. Jesus is placed into the context of the Judaism of His time. A brief Section outlines the relevant Greek vocabulary of fasting, which is quite limited, after which a social-scientific interpretation is attempted for each reference to fasting in the New Testament. Fasting texts are interpreted in the gospels and Acts, and the relative silence of the epistles on fasting is noted. From the social-scientific interpretation of these texts, a synthetic New Testament theology of fasting is articulated, which delineates salient aspects of fasting in the context in which it is presented in the New Testament.

Chapter 5 moves toward a contemporary Evangelical theology of fasting. Evangelical theology is presented in its historical context, in broad terms. Evangelical spirituality is examined in detail, from the perspectives of church history and biblical theology. Having laid a foundation of Evangelical theology and spirituality, Evangelical fasting literature is explored. A literature review outlines and critiques the contributions of Arthur Wallis, Richard Foster, Dallas Willard, Donald Whitney, Elmer Towns, and Bill Bright – the most prominent popular Evangelical exponents of fasting in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. From these authors, a synthetic theology of fasting within Evangelicalism is presented.

Chapter 6 provides a conclusion to the present study. The study is summarized by chapter. Summaries are also provided of the theologies of fasting presented in Chapters 4 and 5, respectively. These theologies are compared by means of a table which illustrates similarities and differences in emphasis between the two approaches to fasting. An interpretation section gets to the primary goal of the present study – to interpret the divergent views of fasting found in a social-scientific interpretation of the New Testament and in contemporary Evangelical literature, and to seek a means of reconciling the two, if such a means exists. It is proposed that differences between these approaches to fasting are best viewed through the lens of two socio-cultural dichotomies: that of shame-oriented versus guilt-oriented societies, and that of religious ceremonies and rituals (and a third category, spiritual disciplines). Having explored fasting through the perspective of these dichotomies, a reconciliation is attempted between the New Testament theology of fasting and the contemporary Evangelical one. This reconciliation is based on biblical principles expressed in Matthew 9 and Acts 15. On the basis of these principles, it is argued that Jesus and His immediate followers understood that the universal nature of the gospel allowed for differing cultural expressions of faith. Jesus predicted a time when fasting in His absence would not be bound by the cultural norms of His time, and the apostles did not impose Jewish cultural or religious obligations on gentile believers, beyond a few basic guidelines. Thus, it is argued that while Evangelical fasting may not conform strictly to the model of fasting in the New Testament, it may indeed be valid, honoring the spirit of the New Testament. Finally, directions for further study are delineated.

1.7 CONCLUSION

This Chapter has introduced the subject of the present study, and has attempted to narrow and delineate the parameters within which this subject will be examined. The method of research has been articulated and justified, and the relevant literature has been surveyed. Theological assumptions have been disclosed and articulated, and their relevance to the present study stated. The direction of the remaining Chapters has been broadly indicated. The following Chapter will discuss the history, philosophy, and

methodology of social-scientific criticism in the context of other hermeneutical approaches.

Chapter 2

Social-scientific criticism in hermeneutical context

2.1 INTRODUCTION

This Chapter discusses the history, method, and assumptions of social-scientific criticism. First, an attempt is made to define social-scientific criticism. Then, the literary history of social-scientific criticism will be examined, taking into account its early expressions, as well as contemporary proponents. Next, social-scientific criticism will be placed into the larger context of hermeneutical approaches to the New Testament text. Seven critical approaches will be surveyed: redaction criticism, source criticism, historical criticism, form criticism, narrative criticism, postmodern criticism, and feminist criticism. This survey will provide a broad overview of the state of contemporary New Testament criticism and the place of social-scientific criticism in this context. Finally, the critical approach of this study will be discussed.

2.2 SOCIAL-SCIENTIFIC CRITICISM

Social-scientific criticism is an attempt to place the text of the New Testament into the social and cultural context of the first-century Mediterranean world. Elliott defines social-scientific criticism as a component of historical criticism (Elliott 1993:7), and identifies three critical relationships between the text and its cultural environment which must be taken into account in biblical exegesis, in addition to the form and content of texts:

- the 'conditioning factors and intended consequences of the communication process' (Elliott 1993:7), that is, the paralanguage behind the text, the cultural and social implications of the words of the text in their original environment.
- the 'correlation of the text's linguistic, literary, theological (ideological), and social dimensions' (Elliott 1993:7). Texts within their cultural environment are not viewed as one-dimensional; rather, the social-scientific critic attempts to take into account the interplay of factors (social, literary, theological, et cetera) which together comprise the text in its social, canonical, and theological context.

- the ‘manner in which this textual communication was both a reflection of and response to a specific social and cultural context, that is, how it was designed to serve as an effective vehicle of social interaction and an instrument of social as well as literary and theological consequence.’ (Elliott 1993:7). Social-scientific critics attempt to interpret the text from a position of sympathy, to the extent that such sympathy is possible, with the first-century Mediterranean worldview, and to interpret the text as an occupant of that world might interpret it.

The task of social-scientific criticism is to ‘provide a Western reader with basic Mediterranean cultural concepts with which to create appropriate scenarios for imagining what one is reading’ (Pilch 2002:3-4). The challenges which befall such an interpreter are immediately obvious. The three barriers of time, space, and language present themselves at once. Two thousand years of history have erased or obscured many cultural and social conventions of the New Testament world, and the study of the Greek language does not convey all the cultural nuances present in the original context. The goal of social-scientific criticism, therefore, is forensic: to reconstruct a social and cultural model(s) of the New Testament world, from which the reader may create hermeneutical scenarios for interpreting the text in its context. As Pilch notes, the New Testament world is a high-context society – much of the meaning in the textual communication was contained in its social and cultural context:

Reading and interpreting the Bible requires that the reader imagine scenarios for the books and passages being read. But the Bible is a high-context document. This means that the authors of the Bible safely assumed that they did not have to present their audiences or readers with all the details of the stories and events they were reporting.

(Pilch 2002:2)

How can the contemporary Western reader gain access to the context of the New Testament world? Historical criticism has attempted to provide an historical context in which to place the events of the New Testament, and without a doubt this is a helpful and necessary task. The history surrounding an event gives vital clues to its significance. But history provides only one aspect of the context of a text. History can

tell the contemporary reader what events led up to a particular moment, and those which followed it, but the study of history itself cannot tell the contemporary reader how the people of another time would have interpreted these historical events: how they would have spoken of them; what cultural significance would be attached to these events. By way of a modern example, one could place the 1969 moon landing in its historical context, examining the development of various elements of technology which led to the lunar mission, and this would be helpful. An historian could also discuss the 'space race' between the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, but without a clear understanding of the social and cultural dimensions present in the United States at that time, one's interpretation of this event would be incomplete, to say the least. A similar example could be made from the election of Nelson Mandela as president of South Africa in 1994 – cultural, social, and historical factors merge to provide the full context of such an event. An interpreter who does not take all these factors into account will not grasp the full import of such events, nor could he or she properly interpret literary expressions of it.

If historical criticism is a necessary, albeit incomplete, approach to the New Testament text, what else is needed? According to Elliott

what is still needed ... is a method and a set of models for understanding *relations* amongst the social phenomena: how they are *connected* and how they *work*...What is also needed is a method that considers the relationship between beliefs and behaviours; the relationship between beliefs (and culture in general) and their economic and social *Mutterboden*; the relationship between ideas and group interests; and the nexus of interests, ideas and ideology.

(Elliott 2011:2)

To accomplish this task, the modern discipline of social science is brought to bear. Social scientists attempt to establish relationships between belief and behavior, to critically examine what defines a given culture: what it values, how it communicates, how its economic, social, and family structures are created and maintained, its history, and other defining characteristics which distinguish it from other cultures. As Esler notes:

New Testament documents speak to us from particular social worlds and need to be investigated using disciplines developed specifically to comprehend the social dimensions of the human experience. Without this, our understanding of the texts will be unnecessarily impaired.

(Esler 1994:2)

The goal of social-scientific criticism, then, is to apply the principles of social science to the New Testament world in order to create paradigms for interpreting the text in its social and cultural (and therefore literary and theological) contexts. Elliott explains:

Social-scientific presuppositions, like theological presuppositions, pertain to three aspects of the interpretive enterprise: the interpreters, the objects to be interpreted, and the method of interpretation.

(Elliott 1993:36)

The interpreters in Elliott's model are the contemporary readers of the New Testament, the objects to be interpreted include both the written texts and the social institutions which provide their context, and the method of interpretation is the application of social-scientific principles to assimilate the theological, literary, social, historical, and cultural contexts to create scenarios for interpreting the text, as it was written from its original author to its original audience.

Van Eck describes the goal of social-scientific criticism:

[T]he primary goal of such an exegetical model is the interpretation of the text as it was designed to serve as a vehicle of socio-religious interaction, that is, focusing especially on the questions of how and why the text was designed to function, and what its impact upon the life and activity of its recipients was intended to be.

(Van Eck 1995:78)

Malina's 1981 publication *The New Testament world: Insights from cultural anthropology* has become one of the primary texts of social-scientific criticism. In it, Malina outlines three approaches which social scientists take in examining cultures:

- Structural functionalism: 'The various smaller social systems like family, government, economics, education, and religion are bound together by common

values and norms, and these smaller social systems (called social institutions) interact with each other in a cooperative and harmonious way' (1981:19).

- Conflict model: '... social systems... consisting of various groups (e.g., family, government, economics, education, religion) which have differing goals and interests and therefore use coercive tactics on each other in order to realize their own goals' (1981:20).
- Symbolic model: '... presupposes that human individual and group behavior is organized around the symbolic meanings and expectations that are attached to objects that are socially valued' (1981:22).

These models, according to Malina, are not mutually exclusive, and he uses all three of them to varying degrees in his analysis of the New Testament world. Underpinning these models is the idea of a *social system*, which may be interpreted according to any of these models. The social system of the first-century Mediterranean world is the subject of inquiry in social-scientific New Testament criticism. Malina writes:

A social system is a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in people, formulating conceptions of value-objects, and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations are perceived to be uniquely realistic.... The social system, as system of symbols, consists of persons (self and others), things (nature, time, space), and events (activities of persons and things).

(Malina 1981:21)

The goal of social-scientific criticism of the New Testament is to interpret the events and message of the New Testament according to the social systems from which they arise.⁴ The social-scientific critic seeks to grasp the worldview of the original actors and audience of the New Testament, to interpret the scripture according to the social and

⁴ Van Eck clarifies: 'Social-scientific criticism approaches texts from the premise that the historical contexts of texts have further social dimensions than only 'that what was going on when and where'. From a social scientific point of view, the contexts of texts also refer to social behaviour involving two or more persons, social groups, social institutions, social systems and patterns and codes of sociality. Texts, also, are likewise shaped in their language, content and perspectives by the social systems in which they were produced. Texts also serve as a vehicle for social interaction. The contexts of texts are social contexts, contexts shaped by societal conditions, structures and processes. In their content, structure, strategies and meaning texts presuppose and communicate information about the social systems of which they are a product' (Van Eck 2009:6).

cultural assumptions which would be present in both the author and the original audience. Malina explains:

Such study looks to comparative differences in the way human beings learn to interpret the objects in their environment. These objects notably comprise the major bearers of human meaning: self, others, nature, time, space, and the ALL. Along with interpretations based on and derived from comparison, anthropologists are equally interested in structures or patterns of behavior that human groups create and utilize in order to realize and express the meanings and feelings that are invested in self, others nature, time, space, and the ALL. Such structures are called social institutions.

(Malina 2001:6)

The key tool, then of social-scientific critics, is an examination of the social institutions which comprise the social system of the New Testament. Below, three social institutions are examined: honor and shame, dyadism, and limited good. These social institutions are relevant to the present study, and are commonly examined by social-scientific critics. These social institutions are illustrated with examples from the gospels. The social institutions below are not exhaustive of the range of social and cultural factors which a social-scientific critic might explore in interpreting a given text, but rather are indicative of such factors.

2.3 SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS

2.3.1 Honor and shame

The primary social institution of the early Mediterranean world is honor. Honor is a social currency which can be gained or lost in one's relationship with others. Honor is the community's recognition of one's place within the larger community. Malina defines honor as 'a register of social rating which entitles a person to interact in specific ways with equals, superiors, and subordinates, according to the prescribed cultural cues of the society' (see Neyrey 1991:26).

There are, basically speaking, two kinds of honor in the first-century Mediterranean world. Ascribed honor is "honor that a person gains through kinship or endowment" (Neyrey 1991:28). Honor can be ascribed by one who has honor, such as a king or a nobleman, whose sanction of a person's honor is recognized by others on the basis of

the rank or power of the one bestowing the honor. Honor can also be ascribed by birth, because family is the repository of honor of past illustrious ancestors and their accumulated acquired honor' (Neyrey 1991:28). For example, in the gospels, Jesus is ascribed the honor of birth in the line of David through the genealogy presented by Matthew and by Luke's account of his miraculous conception and birth. In Luke's gospel, honor is ascribed by the angel Gabriel to John the Baptist (LK 1:13-17), to Mary (LK 1:28), and to Jesus (LK 1:32-33). Honor can also be acquired through one's behavior in specific social interactions.

The acquisition and retention of honor is a driving force in nearly every social interaction which occurs outside the family unit in the ancient Mediterranean world. Examples might include gift-giving, an invitation to a meal, legal and theological debates, buying and selling, arranging marriages, agricultural or industrial cooperation, and mutual help. Each of these situations, of which there are many in the New Testament, is a 'mutual attempt to acquire honor from one's social equal' (Neyrey 1991:29).

The process of attempting to acquire honor is called *challenge and riposte*, and consists of a public challenge to one's honor, and one's subsequent response to such a challenge. The manner in which one responds, and the quality of the response, is judged by the (present) larger community, and honor is ascribed to the victor. Honor, like everything else in early Mediterranean society, is in limited supply (see § 3.4 below), so honor that is gained by the victor is necessarily forfeited by the loser.

An example of ongoing challenge and riposte can be found in Jesus' interactions with the Pharisees. The antagonistic nature of Jesus' relationship to the Pharisees may be traced back to John the Baptist, a member of Jesus' family⁵ and Jesus' first public advocate, who publically insulted the Pharisees as a 'brood of vipers' (Mt 3:7). Early in Jesus' ministry, before any public interaction is recorded between Jesus and the

⁵ John the Baptist was Jesus' cousin. Malina explains that honor is presumed within family lines: 'Honor is always presumed to exist within one's own family of blood, i.e., among all of one's blood relatives. A person can always trust blood relatives. Outside that circle, all people are assumed dishonorable... an assumption based on the agonistic quality of competition for the scarce commodity, honor' (Malina 1991:32). John the Baptist's assault on the Pharisee's honor may have been seen as an extension of, or at least related to, Jesus' later strife with the Pharisees because of this familial relationship.

Pharisees, Jesus insults their honor in the sermon on the mount – ‘unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven’ (Mt 5:20). This would have been interpreted as an attempt to gain honor from the Pharisees through a public insult. This takes the form of a challenge, and invites a riposte. Such a riposte is indicated in Matthew 9:34: ‘He casts out demons by the ruler of demons.’ Many such challenge-riposte interactions occur between Jesus and the Pharisees, concluding with Jesus’ trial and crucifixion, which was a final attempt to dishonor Jesus through a humiliating, painful death.

One of the key tenets of the challenge-riposte interplay is that ‘only equals can play’ (Neyrey 1991:30). Honor is not gained from someone of a higher class, nor taken from someone of a lower class. The Pharisees, for example, did not challenge Jesus’ honor until He had become sufficiently popular and prolific as a teacher that He was publicly recognized as their equal.

Riposte may take three forms, according to Malina:

- a positive refusal to act;
- acceptance of the message, and a counter challenge; and
- a negative refusal to act (see Neyrey 1991:31).

A positive refusal to act is a refusal to acknowledge that the challenger is one’s equal. In such an instance, the challenger is met with ‘scorn, disdain, or contempt’ (Neyrey 1991:31). An example of this can be found in Matthew 16:1-4. In this text, the Pharisees and Sadducees publically challenge Jesus by demanding that He perform a miracle. The demand for honor is clear: if Jesus acquiesces to their demand, He loses honor because he has submitted to them; if He cannot produce a miracle, then He is likewise shamed. Jesus’ response, then, is to dismiss the challenge with scorn and a rebuke, as well as a challenge of His own: “‘An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign; and a sign will not be given it, except the sign of Jonah.’” And He left them and went away’ (Mt 16:4). In His response, Jesus insults the Pharisees by refusing to acknowledge them as equals, and further challenges them to explain and interpret the sign of Jonah. In the opinion of the on looking crowds, Jesus would have retained His honor, while the Pharisees have been shamed.

The second option is for the recipient of the challenge to accept the message (challenge), and respond with a challenge in kind. An example of such an exchange can be found in Matthew 19:3-9. In this passage, the Pharisees again challenge Jesus, this time with a legal question: 'is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason at all?' Jesus does not dismiss their question, but rather answers with a retort of his own: 'Have you not read...?', followed by His answer to their question. The Pharisees respond with a further challenge: 'Why then did Moses command...?', to which Jesus replies with a personal and direct response: 'Because of your hardness of heart Moses permitted you....' The Pharisees do not respond, (see 'negative refusal' below), and Jesus does not issue a further challenge in this dialogue; clearly He perceives that none is necessary. He has been challenged and responded well, therefore His honor is intact.

The third option is a negative refusal to respond to the challenge; 'the receiver can react by offering nothing by way of response; he can fail or neglect to respond, and this will imply dishonor' (Neyrey 1991:31). This can be seen in Matthew 22. After a series of challenge/riposte encounters in which Jesus is the clear victor (He had 'silenced the Sadducees'; Mt 22:34), Jesus offers a final challenge to the Pharisees regarding the identity and status of the Christ in relation to David. The Pharisees offer a response, which Jesus refutes by citing the Old Testament in a very persuasive and insightful way. After this, 'No one was able to answer Him a word, nor did anyone dare from that day on to ask Him another question' (Mt 22:46). The Pharisees and Sadducees were dishonored by their inability to respond to Jesus' teaching.⁶

⁶ As an illustration of how these Mediterranean social constructs are often overlooked in Western biblical criticism, several prominent commentaries make no mention of the significance of honor in Matthew 22:46, nor of the challenge/riposte social dynamic. Albright and Mann (1971:275) simply note: 'The conclusion provided by Matthew and Mark emphasizes that the opposition to Jesus has now taken on far more sinister forms.' Blomberg (1992:337) notes simply that the Pharisees were trapped, but attaches no particular significance to this. Guthrie (1972:286-287) misses the cultural import of this exchange entirely: 'When His critics no longer dared to ask Jesus more questions, He Himself initiated a question, a welcome change after the controversial problems that had been posed to trap Him. Jesus had no ulterior motive. It was not His mission to win word battles. He took this occasion to draw attention to profound spiritual truths. His own question was not framed in a spirit of argument. It was aimed to enlighten the minds of those who seemed utterly incapable of recognizing His mission... The critics gave no answer. They could have pursued the matter if they had a real desire to know the explanation.' Calvin provides a detailed critique of the theological import of Jesus' words about the Messiah as the Son of David, but neglects to mention the cultural significance of this interchange, or the challenge/riposte dynamic (Calvin 1972:43-44).

2.3.2 Individuality and collectivism

In the first-century Mediterranean world individuals were described by their relationship to the community at large. They would be identified by their location (Saul of Tarsus), by their nationality ('Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons'; Tt 1:12), by their clan (Paul is a Benjamite, Mary is of the house of David), by family relationships (James and John are the sons of Zebedee), or by one's school of thought (Paul is a student of Gamaliel; Apollos received only the baptism of John). Such a view of the individual in society is known as dyadism.

Individual people are not known or valued because of their uniqueness, but in terms of their dyad, that is, some other person or thing. Dyadism, therefore is a means value by which one's honor can be continually checked, affirmed, or challenged... Personal identity and knowledge of this sort belong in a cultural world that is highly ordered and carefully classified, so that there is a place for everyone and everyone in his place... It follows that such people tend to think of themselves and others in stereotypes which tell of their role and status: as fishermen and carpenters, as scribes and lawyers, as governors and kings.

(Pilch & Malina 1998:54)

This view of one's culture and society, and one's place in it, is in stark contrast to the radical individualism of the contemporary West. Neyrey writes:

The individualistic, self-centered focus typical of contemporary American experience was simply not of concern to first-century Mediterraneans. Given their cultural experience, such self-concerned individualism would appear quite boring and inconsequential. For group survival it would be dysfunctional.

(Neyrey 1991:72)

Dyadic persons find their sense of identity in the context of several dyads, or 'others', which determine who their equals are and the social norms by which they may be judged. Social harmony is derived from knowing one's place in the world, and remaining within it.

An example may be found in the story of Jesus' conversation with the 'rich young ruler', recounted in Matthew 19:16-16, Mark 10:17-31, and Luke 18:18-30. This young man approached Jesus with a question and a challenge: 'Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life' (Lk 18:18)? Jesus' riposte ('Why do you call me good? No one is

good except God alone’) and the ensuing dialogue lead to Jesus’ injunction to ‘sell all that you possess and distribute it to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me’ (Lk 18:22). The rich young ruler went away grieving, because he was very rich. If this passage is interpreted with an eye to the cultural and social dynamics at play, it becomes apparent that the rich young ruler fears the loss of his honor, rather than merely the loss of his wealth. Matthew, Mark, and Luke have indicated that this man had a high station in life (hence his title); that is, that his dyad, or group of equals, was socially above Jesus and His disciples. Jesus’ call to discipleship required that he separate himself from his dyad – that is, that his entire social structure should disintegrate.

This meaning was not lost on Jesus’ disciples as they observed this dialogue. Peter, speaking for the disciples, responds: ‘Behold, we have left our own homes and followed you’ (Lk 18:28). Jesus’ disciples had each changed their dyads to some degree, just as Jesus called the rich young ruler to do – they were no longer fishermen or tax collectors, but vagrants following a wandering rabbi. Peter’s statement implies an identity crisis brought on by the loss of their dyads. Jesus’ reply indicates that such social alienation is worth the eschatological reward of discipleship: ‘And He said to them, “Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not receive many times as much at this time and in the age to come, eternal life”’ (Lk. 18:29-30).

The dyadic nature of New Testament society may be further illustrated by two examples from the life of Peter. First, after the crucifixion of Jesus, Peter returned to his dyad. Along with several other disciples, he returned to his life as a fisherman. Later, in Acts 4, Peter and John were brought before the Sanhedrin. As the Jewish religious leaders listened to their apologetic, they ‘observed the confidence of Peter and John and understood that they were uneducated and untrained men, they were amazed, and began to recognize them as having been with Jesus’ (Ac 4:13). The dyadic nature of this interaction is evident; the religious leaders recognized the confidence of Peter and John. Such confidence was not expected from ‘uneducated and untrained men’, that is,

men of a lower dyad. Peter and John's nonconformity to their dyad brought to mind another Jew from Galilee who did not conform to the social norms of His dyad – Jesus.

Neyrey's table below illustrates some differences between Luke's world and the United States today. The dyadic nature of Luke's world is evident, particularly in the behavior areas of activity, relations, and the relationship of man to nature. Clearly, the first-century Mediterranean was interested in fitting *into* his or her world, whereas the twenty-first century westerner tends to stand *against* his or her world.

Table 1: Neyrey's comparison of Luke's world and the U.S. today

Behavior area	Luke's world	U.S. today
Activity	Being	Doing
Relations	Collateral	Individual
Time	Present, Past	Future, Present
Man-Nature	Subordinate to	Mastery over
Human nature	Mixed; evil	Neutral

(Neyrey 1991:81)

2.3.3 Kinship: The juncture of honor and dyadism

The social concepts of honor and of dyadism were discussed above. In ancient Mediterranean society these two constructions merge together in the family. The family is a person's primary dyad, and the primary source of honor. Honor is assumed within the family, and the family honor is defended at all costs.

The pursuit of honor, however, was not an individual endeavor in the New Testament world. Mediterranean antiquity was a strong-group culture. The groups to which individuals belonged contributed significantly to the development of personal identity and, most importantly, they determined the basic contours of social relations. Cultural values and social codes related to honor-and-shame inevitably intersected this fundamental aspect of ancient society in some decisive ways, with the result that (a) social groups served as key repositories of honor and (b) the family – the most important group of all – took pride of place, in this regard.

(Hellerman 2009:16)

Neyrey and Rohrbaugh have summarized the relationship between kinship and honor in ancient Mediterranean culture: 'In antiquity the chief cultural grounds for an individual's status are related to his kin, since a man's origin and birth ordinarily provide a reliable index of his worth for the rest of his life (2001:10; see also Malina & Neyrey 1996; Neyrey 1998).

2.3.4 Limited good

Another important social institution in the ancient Mediterranean world is the concept of 'limited good.' This is the view that the world is, essentially, a zero sum game, in which one person's gain necessarily indicates a loss to another. Foster describes it thus:

By 'Image of Limited Good' I mean that broad areas of peasant behavior are patterned in such a fashion as to suggest that peasants view their social, economic, and natural universes – their total environment – as one in which all of the desired things in life such as land, wealth, health, friendship and love, manliness and honor, respect and status, power and influence, security and safety, exist in finite quantity and are always in short supply, as far as the peasant is concerned. Not only do these and all other "good things" exist in finite and limited quantities, but in addition, there is no way directly within peasant power to increase the available quantities.

(Foster 1965:296)

Limited good is the view that 'all goods are limited in quantity and are already fully distributed' (Neyrey & Rohrbaugh 2001:2), and that the peasant is powerless to increase his or her share of these goods – merely to defend it against the reduction implied by another's gain. Since honor is the primary social currency traded in the New Testament world, honor is a quite significant factor in the 'limited good' worldview. Many of Jesus' conflicts, not only with the Pharisees and Sadducees, but also with other groups, such as His neighbors, and within His circle of disciples, arises from the view that honor is a limited good: 'some people perceive that their own worth diminishes precisely as Jesus gains greater respect and honor. In fact, Jesus' increase *causes* their decrease.' (Neyrey and Rohrbaugh 2001:3, emphasis in the original).

The natural social and theological outcome of this view of 'limited good' is envy. Envy is a desire for another's status or position which follows as a matter of course from the

'limited good' worldview.⁷ It is important for the social-scientific critic to place envy in its proper social and cultural context in order to interpret it correctly.

Maijala (*et al.* 2000) attempts to describe envy in the New Testament, but misses the import of the 'limited good' worldview:

Envy is also a central dimension in the New Testament. Jesus was envied by the chief priests because of the miracles he performed and his reputation. Pontius Pilate did not dare to disclaim the priests, though he was well aware of their motives: '... he knew that the chief priests had delivered him for envy' (the Gospel according to Mark 15:10). From a biblical point of view, envy can be defined as a sin based on the selfishness of a person acting in his/her own interest, from which people should strive to be free. From the religious viewpoint, shame and guilt were chosen as concepts related to envy.

(Maijala *et al* 2000:1344)

Envy is described as a sin in the scriptures⁸, but to dismiss it simply as a sin to be avoided is to fail to take into account its role in the social and cultural dynamics of the ancient Mediterranean world, and its relation to the concept of 'limited good.'

Pilch and Malina provide a more culturally-specific definition of envy in the New Testament context:

This is a value which directs one to begrudge another the possession of some singular quality, object, or relationship. It is the limited nature of the quality, object, or relationship in question and the social status of the possessor which trigger envy.... Envy clearly presupposes the perception of limited good.

(Pilch & Malina 1998:59-60)

⁷ In the Western psychoanalytic tradition, envy is usually divorced from a broader social context, and viewed as a facet of one's individual personality. For example: 'Envy is a painful and contradictory emotion based on an experience of lacking and comparison, which typically involves a wish to have something good the other possesses and the envious person is lacking. Envy may include feelings of disappointment, shame, guilt, grief as well as admiration and hopes for identification. It is modified greed, suggestive of the emotional state of jealousy. The counter-concepts of envy are gratitude, generosity and happiness. Envy can be experienced as a threat and one can protect oneself from it. Especially when unconscious, envy may lead to destructive behaviour or non-harmonious existence. On the other hand, recognition of envy may open up new developmental possibilities towards harmonious existence. Envy can be perceived as a dimension of a person's health and illness.' (Maijala *et al.* 2000:1345-1346)

⁸ See Mark 7:22, Romans 1:29, I Timothy 6:4, Titus 3:3, I Peter 2:1 for discussions of envy as sin in the New Testament.

Envy is present, both explicitly and implicitly, in much of the New Testament gospel narrative. Further, envy is discussed in the epistles explicitly, and is repeatedly listed among the sins a Christian should avoid⁹. In spite of the prominence of envy in the New Testament, it has been often overlooked in contemporary Evangelical theology.¹⁰

A prominent feature of the social realia of envy in the first-century Mediterranean world, and in most peasant cultures throughout the world, is the phenomenon of the ‘evil eye’. The ‘evil eye’ was associated with ‘scarcity, famine, and competition for food; malice at meals; social encounters and ungenerosity’ (Elliott 2009:2); and as both a source of, and a product of, envy.

The ‘evil eye’ is a natural outgrowth of the worldview of limited good – when there are scarce resources to be shared, people look on one another’s possessions with envy, and look with suspicion on others who may envy their goods. Elliott explains:

Certain ecological, economic and social conditions provided the seedbed for Evil Eyebelief and practice and the structures that made it plausible. They thrive in small scale, face-to face communities marked by competition over scarce resources, economic disparity, social stratification, concern over social boundaries, and where centralized authority for the adjudication of conflicts generally is lacking, unenforced, or ineffective. The image of “limited good,” so typical of such “agonistic” peasant communities ... – the presumption, namely, that all goods and resources were in limited and scarce supply so that your gain could come only at my loss--was consistent with such competition and fueled feelings of envy toward successful rivals. The “ocular aggression” that also typifies circum-Mediterranean culture, with its taboo on glaring and staring, accounts in part for evil and malicious intent being connected to the eye in particular. With the eye also thought to be linked directly to

⁹ See Romans 1:29, 1 Timothy 6:4, Titus 3:3, 1 Peter 2:1

¹⁰ For example, Ferguson, Wright, and Packer do not include a definition of envy in their venerable *New Dictionary of Theology* (1988). The same dictionary, interestingly, does not attempt to define ‘limited good’. Likewise, Elwell’s *Concise Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (1991) does not attempt to define envy. Atkinson et al (1995) define envy only as a subset of jealousy, and do not incorporate social or cultural dimensions: ‘Envy relates only to hating and not having, and can be both reactive and innate, destroying a person’s life’ (Atkinson et al. 1995:507). Carl F. H. Henry’s venerable *Baker’s Dictionary of Christian Ethics* briefly defines envy as ‘the resentful and even hateful dislike of the good fortune or blessing of another’, but does not place envy in any cultural context (Henry 1973:213). Perhaps most telling of the contemporary neglect of envy is its absence from Bercot’s *Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs* (1998), which provides quotes from the early church fathers on over 700 topics of interest to contemporary evangelicals on topics as diverse as entertainment and dyeing of the hair. This may illustrate that envy is simply not a factor in contemporary Evangelical hermeneutics or theology.

the heart, the seat of thought and disposition, the eye was seen as a channel to, and reflection of, the heart and its dispositions, wholesome or evil. Evil thoughts of the heart, and in particular envy and malice, were manifested and projected by an Evil Eye.

(Elliot 2009:3-4)

Anthropologist Clarence Maloney's 1976 study of the evil eye across cultures revealed seven aspects of evil eye belief and practice:

- (1) power emanates from the eye (or mouth) and strikes some object or person;
- (2) the stricken object is of value, and its destruction or injury is sudden;
- (3) the one casting the evil eye may not know he has the power;
- (4) the one affected may not be able to identify the source of power;
- (5) the evil eye can be deflected or its effects modified or cured by particular devices, rituals, and symbols;
- (6) the belief helps to explain or rationalize sickness, misfortune, or loss of possessions such as animals or crops;
- (7) in at least some functioning of the belief everywhere, envy is a factor.

(Maloney1976: vii-viii)

Another social and cultural consequence of the 'limited good' view is social immobility. That is, people with this view 'will be reluctant to advance beyond their peers because of the sanctions they know will be leveled against them' (Pilch & Malina 1998:123-124). When a person rises above the social status indicated by his or her dyad, the person becomes the subject of envy within the community. This again is at the root of many of Jesus' conflicts with others. Writing about Jesus' several conflicts with his neighbors due to His rise in status, Neyrey and Rohrbaugh write:

They are perceived as increases in Jesus' status over and against his former neighbors. Such a quantum leap in honor is apparently evaluated under the perception of "limited good," which adequately explains his compatriots' hostile reaction to Jesus. His gain is interpreted as their loss.

(Neyrey & Rohrbaugh 2001:10)

Neyrey and Rohrbaugh provide a helpful survey of expressions of limited good in ancient literature, critiquing both biblical and extra-biblical material. They summarize their survey in the following table:

Table 2: Neyrey and Rohrbaugh’s ancient examples of limited good

Author and work	Expression of ‘Limited Good’	Commodity in dispute	Reaction, especially Envy	Agonistic redress
Iamblicus	clearly stated	honor	not mentioned	not mentioned
Plutarch, <i>Listening</i> , 44B	clearly stated	honor	implied	not mentioned
Plutarch, <i>Old Men</i> , 787D	clearly stated	honor	implied	attack
Josephus, <i>Vita</i> , 122-23	clearly stated	success, good fortune	immoderate envy	inspiring hatred and defection
Josephus, <i>Ant.</i> , 4.32 & 4.51	clearly stated	honor	not mentioned	divine judgment
Philo, <i>Ebr.</i> , 110	clearly stated	honor	not mentioned	not mentioned
Fronto, <i>Letters</i> , 4.1	clearly stated	attention, favor	explicitly mentioned	“deadly & fatal”
Judg 7:2	clearly stated	honor	not mentioned	not mentioned
1 Sam. 18:9	clearly stated	reputation, honor	implied	“eyed” David
Mark 6:1-5	implied	reputation, honor	implied	“took offense at him.”
Mark 7:24-30	implied	patronage, honor	not mentioned	bestowed favor
Mark 9:38-41	implied	reputation, honor	implied	“they commanded him to stop”
Mark 10:35-45	implied	status, honor	implied	“they became angry at James and John”

(Neyrey & Rohrbaugh 2001:14)

The authors bring out several traits of the ‘limited good’ worldview of the ancient Mediterranean world:

- A zero-sum game: ‘A causal connection is invariably perceived between the gains of one person and the losses of another’ (2001:13).
- In most examples of conflict due to the ‘limited good’ cultural dynamic, honor is the commodity in dispute: ‘that is, commendation by another, reputation, precedence, role and status, attention or favor from a high-ranking person’ (2001:13).
- Often, an attempt is made to restore the lost commodity, such as honor: ‘those who perceive themselves as losing because of another’s success take hostile

action to redress the imbalance’ (2001:13). This redress may include gossip, vilification, dismissal and scorn, or even murder.

- Conflicts due to a ‘limited good’ worldview usually involve envy, ‘a most important element in the social dynamics of ancient Greeks, Romans, and Israelites (2001:13).

2.4 A BRIEF BIBLIOGRAPHICAL HISTORY OF SOCIAL-SCIENTIFIC CRITICISM

2.4.1 The development of social-scientific criticism

Social-scientific criticism emerged in the 1970’s (Elliott 1993:17) as a distinct hermeneutical methodology, but prior to this, there were predecessors which prepared the way for the application of social-scientific principles to biblical criticism. To critique these sources in detail is beyond the scope of this study, but a brief outline is in order. Elliott (1993:17-18) cites the following authors as contributors to the model which would become social-scientific criticism:

- Max Weber published a sociological study of ancient Israel in 1919.
- Ernst Troeltsch published *The social teaching of the Christian church* in German in 1911, and in English in 1931.
- Adolf Deissmann, a New Testament scholar with an interest in everyday life in first-century Palestine, placed an emphasis on extra-biblical sources such as papyri and inscriptions.
- The ‘Chicago School’, including such authors as Shailer Matthews, Shirley Jackson Case, and Donald Riddle, pioneered the ‘sociohistorical method’.
- The work of Edwin A. Judge, a social historian in the 1960s and 1970s.

From a synthesis of these approaches to history, sociology, and biblical criticism, a new hermeneutic began to emerge in the 1970’s. Elliott (1993:18) notes that not every ‘book or article with the term “social” or “sociological” in its title (is) an exercise in social-scientific criticism.’ He lists five categories which describe the literature which contributed to social-scientific criticism:

- Investigations of ‘*social realia*’, that is, groups, occupations, or institutions ‘generally to illustrate some feature or features of ancient society but with no

concern for analyzing, synthesizing, and explaining these social facts in social-scientific fashion' (1993:18).¹¹

- Studies which integrate social, economic, and political phenomena to construct a *social history* of a particular period, movement, or group. (1993:19).¹²
- Studies which include the '*deliberate use of social theory and models*' (Elliott 1993:19, emphasis in the original) in biblical interpretation. Representative authors include Theissen, Gager, and Meeks, whose contributions are discussed below.
- Studies which place an emphasis on the theories and models of the social sciences, particularly cultural anthropology, to interpret the Bible. Representative authors include Neyrey, Malina, and other members of the Context Group (Elliott 1993:19), which are discussed below.
- Studies which incorporate 'the research, theory, and models of the social sciences' in the analysis of biblical text (1993:19). Authors include Belo, Elliott, and Esler, whose contributions are considered below.

Having briefly described several predecessors to social-scientific criticism and several categories of literature which may be described as contributions to social-scientific study of the Scriptures, the present study will sketch the contributions of several prominent authors in the social-scientific school.

Gerd Theissen's 1973 treatise *Wanderradikalismus: Literatursoziologische Aspekte der Überlieferung von Worten Jesu im Urchristentum*¹³ was published in Germany. In this work Theissen 'focuses on the *transmitters* of the Jesus tradition and the correlation between their social circumstances and behavior, on the one hand, and the content of

¹¹ Examples include Benko and O'Rourke (1971), Grant (1926), Jeremias (1929), Malherbe (1977) and Stambaugh and Balch (1986).

¹² See Grant (1977), Hengel (1974), Koester (1982), Schottroff and Stegemann (1978, 1979), and Stegemann (1984).

¹³ In English: *Itinerant radicalism: The tradition of Jesus sayings from the perspective of the sociology of literature*.

their teaching on the other' (Elliott 1993:21, emphasis in the original). Theissen writes concerning his approach to the social-scientific interpretation of the scriptures:

An analysis of roles investigates typical patterns of behavior; an analysis of factors the way in which this behavior is determined by society; an analysis of function its effects upon society. No attempt is made to find a social 'first cause' as economic, ecological, political and cultural factors cannot be separated in their reciprocal interaction.

(Theissen 1977:1)

Theissen's initial study, and those which followed it, were quite influential in biblical criticism. Elliott appraises Theissen's contributions thus:

Theissen' studies range widely in their subject matter but in general demonstrate how fresh questions concerning the correlation of belief and behavior, ideas and material conditions, theological symbols and social relations can generate new perspectives on old texts and revisions of previously assured texts.

(Elliott 1993:22-23)

Fernando Belo, a Portuguese priest, wrote a Marxist critique of the Gospel of Mark in 1974. In it, he attempted to lay a foundation for a materialist, rather than idealist, reading of the gospel in its social context. Van Eck has offered a twofold criticism of Belo's interpretation of Mark, as well as that of two other authors, Myers and Waetjen:

First, their respective literary approaches do not take the narrative techniques of Mark seriously, especially in regard to the ideological perspective of the narrator on the topographical level of the text.... Second, we saw that in the works of Belo and Myers, in concentrating on some sociological aspects of Mark, use models which look to be either socio historical in character, or, when social-scientific models indeed are used, the question may be asked whether these studies succeed to avoid fallacies of ethnocentrism, anachronism, and reductionism.

(Van Eck1995:71)

Van Eck's criticism notwithstanding, Belo's work is significant, if not for the clarity and accuracy of his findings, then for his attempt to apply social-scientific methods to the interpretation of a biblical text while social-scientific criticism was in its nascent stage.

Another early social-scientific critic was John Gager, a professor at Princeton. He published *Kingdom and community* in 1975, which examined social forces which shaped Christianity in its early years. Elliott cites Gager with first exposing biblical scholars to the 'potential of the marriage of exegesis and the social sciences' (Elliott 1993:23). Following Gager in 1980, Howard Clark Kee, of Boston University, published *Christian origins in sociological perspective*, which called attention to the range of social-science research which was applicable to the study of Christian origins and Christian literature.

Bruce Malina's *The New Testament world: Insights from cultural anthropology*, published in 1981, 'drew on the research of Mediterranean anthropology to understand the cultural scripts of New Testament society' (Elliott 1993:24). This has become an essential text in the discipline of social-scientific criticism. Elliott praises Malina:

The result of this study, the first of its kind, is a fascinating introduction to the alien yet coherent culture of the Bible and to the perceptions and values that governed the interactions of its characters. A truly seminal work, it has alerted exegetes to the valuable resources of Mediterranean anthropology and has spawned a host of subsequent studies of typical biblical cultural traits.

(Elliott 1993:25)

Evangelical scholar L. Russ Bush reviews Malina's text as follows:

Malina has attempted to provide an introduction to this problem of transcultural hermeneutics. He is especially helpful when describing the ancient Greek culture that lies behind Paul's letters. I cannot vouch for the validity of each of his 'insights,' but in principle he is clearly correct.

(Bush 1994:98-99)

Malina would become perhaps the most prodigious author among social-scientific critics, writing a number of influential studies in social-scientific criticism and Mediterranean anthropology throughout the 1980s and beyond.

John Elliott's *A home for the homeless: A sociological exegesis of 1 Peter, its situation and strategy*, was also published in 1981. This book was the first application of

sociological models to a particular Biblical text. In reviewing this book, Kee wrote: ‘both in the method it outlines and defends, and in the substance of the interpretive results, this is a landmark in biblical studies’ (Kee 1982:285). Elliott’s later works, such as his 1993 *What is social-scientific criticism?* have become benchmark works in the field of social-scientific criticism.

Wayne Meeks of Yale University published his book *The first urban Christians: The social world of the apostle Paul* in 1983. Meeks uses the sociological perspective of structural functionalism to provide ‘a panoramic view of the Pauline churches, their social constituency, organization, governance, rituals, and correlated patterns of belief and behavior’ (Elliott 1993:25). This book was well received by early social-scientific critics such as Elliott, Malina, and Theissen.

Social-scientific criticism today has established a unique and distinctive identity among hermeneutical disciplines. Social-scientific treatments of biblical and apocryphal texts are widely published,¹⁴ and social-scientific criticism enjoys prominence in learned societies, such as the Society of Biblical Literature (Elliott 2008).

One other author is particularly relevant to this study of social-scientific criticism. Ernest Van Eck, of the University of Pretoria, has heavily influenced the shape of this study with his guidance. Van Eck is a prolific author, publishing numerous articles in English and Afrikaans ranging from book reviews of prominent social-scientific critical texts, to discussions of inclusivity, the parables of Jesus, biblical and contextual theology, violence, patronage, hell in the New Testament, and Jesus as a ‘public theologian’. Van Eck’s writing is a lucid attempt to interpret the Scriptures in their social and cultural contexts for the contemporary reader. His 1995 *Galilee and Jerusalem in Mark’s story of Jesus: A narratological and social-scientific reading* provides a representative sample of Van Eck’s thought:

¹⁴ For example, Elliott’s 1981 and 2007 texts on I Peter, Nickelsburg’s 2001 treatment of I Enoch, Van Eck’s 2009 *Interpreting the parables of the Galilean Jesus: A social-scientific approach*.

... it is hoped that our understanding of the political opposition between Galilee and Jerusalem, as well as that of the Markan Jesus, will make a contribution not only to the scholarly debate in regard to the understanding of the Gospel of Mark, but also in the way in which the Gospel of Mark could be understood, and utilized, by today's believing communities.

(Van Eck 1995:402)

Thus Van Eck's goal is to interpret the New Testament in the light of first-century Mediterranean culture, and to apply it to communities of faith in contemporary cultures.

2.4.2 Social-scientific criticism today

According to Elliott, social-scientific criticism of the New Testament today has two distinct foci. The first focus is on 'the social and cultural conditions, features, and contours of early Christianity and its social environment' (1993:32). In this case, critics employ the social sciences to interpret data to describe salient features of first-century Mediterranean society, including:

- The imperial social system and the 'interdependency of ecological, economic, social, political, and cultural domains' (Elliott 1993:32) of the New Testament world;
- The interrelated social and cultural domains of specific regions such as Palestine or Asia Minor;
- Roman colonialism and its effect on first-century Judaism;
- Social organization at various levels of society;
- Social institutions and patterns of social behavior and interaction;
- Competition and the formation of factions within society;
- Social stratification according to gender, class, or status;
- Cultural core values and their expression or implication in biblical texts;
- Alternative belief systems within the Judaism and Christianity of the first-century Mediterranean world; and
- Conflict and change within Christianity over time (Elliott 1993:32-33).

The second focus of social-scientific criticism is 'specifically exegetical in nature and directs primary attention to the interpretation of biblical texts' (Elliott 1993:33). In this

focus, social-scientific criticism ‘supplements the other methods of critical interpretation with the aim of elucidating the structure, content, strategy, and intended rhetorical effect of the text within its social context.’ (Elliott 1993:33) These two foci are not mutually exclusive, but complementary. They function, rather, in a dialectic manner: analysis of the social institutions and cultural environment of the New Testament world leads to more detailed exegesis of biblical texts, which in turn yields new insights or paradigms for cultural analysis, which in turn contributes to biblical exegesis, and so on.

2.5 SOCIAL-SCIENTIFIC CRITICISM IN THE CONTEXT OF OTHER HERMENEUTICAL METHODOLOGIES

The following Section will briefly sketch out seven contemporary New Testament critical approaches for the purpose of providing a juxtaposition of these hermeneutical methodologies against social-scientific criticism. A detailed analysis of each of these interpretive systems is beyond the scope of this study; however, it will be useful to place social-scientific criticism into its contemporary hermeneutical context. This comparison will determine areas of conflict and compatibility between social-scientific criticism and other hermeneutical approaches. These include redaction criticism, source criticism, historical criticism, form criticism, narrative criticism, postmodernist criticism, and feminist criticism.

2.5.1 Historical criticism (*Literarkritik, Formgeschichte and Redaktionsgeschichte*)

Social-scientific criticism is a subset of historical criticism, so compatibility between the two methodologies is assumed. Historical criticism is an attempt to place the New Testament text into the historical context of the author and audience. As Ladd writes:

The religious faith and practice of Israel did not arise in a vacuum, but in the cultural setting of ancient Semitic religions. In the same way, the early church arose against the background of first-century Judaism and the Hellenistic world. An adequate understanding of the biblical message demands a familiarity with these religious environments.

(Ladd 1967:171)

Historical criticism, as an exegetical approach, is a synthesis, as it were, of several methods which attempt to interpret the meaning of the text as it was intended from the original author to the original audience.

It comprises the congeries of well-known methods such as source criticism, form criticism, grammatical studies, and archaeology, and it attempts to combine them in ways that will produce assured and agreed-on interpretations of the biblical text, whether these be understood as the author's intention, the understanding of the original audiences, or reference to actual historical events.

(Aichele *et al.* 2009:384)

The social-scientific critic sees the value in historical and archeological research, but also recognizes the need to place both the text and its historical context into their social and cultural contexts. The historian, generically speaking, studies the relationship between historical events. The social scientist attempts to determine what these historical events may have meant to the people who experienced them, and how these historical events in turn shaped the society in which they occurred. The social-scientific critic attempts to interpret the New Testament text in its historical, social, and cultural contexts.

Though not a social-scientific critic, Bultmann alludes to the historian's quest to get beyond mere history to the compelling human factors behind historical events:

The historical method includes the presupposition that history is a unity in the sense of a closed continuum of effects in which individual events are connected by the succession of cause and effect. This does not mean that the process of history is determined by the causal law and that there are no free decisions of men whose actions determine the course of historical happenings. But even a free decision does not happen without cause, without a motive; and the task of the historian is to come to know the motives of actions. All decisions and all deeds have their causes and

consequences; and the historical method presupposes that it is possible in principle to exhibit these and their connection and thus to understand the whole historical process as a closed unity.

(Bultmann 1960:291)¹⁵

The social-scientific critic might tell Bultmann that the 'motives of actions' arise from the social and cultural context of the actors. In the case of the ancient Mediterranean context of the New Testament, the social-scientific critic is able to point to numerous social institutions such as honor, collectivism, limited good, kinship, or purity, which motivate the actors of the gospel drama. Thus, social-scientific criticism falls squarely within the rubric of historical criticism, but seeks to look beyond the historical phenomena to various social realia.

2.5.2 Source criticism (*Literarkritik*)

The method known as source criticism was originally referred to as 'literary criticism', but the name was changed to source criticism to denote its focus not on the literary aspects of the text, but on the underlying source documents (Knierim 1985:123-165). The hypothesis behind source criticism is that the Biblical texts were assembled from disparate sources, rather than as organic wholes. Julius Wellhausen is the father of source criticism, working primarily with Old Testament texts. The primary distinction

¹⁵ For Bultmann, the 'closedness' of the historical method necessarily precludes the possibility of miracles: 'This closedness means that the continuum of historical happenings cannot be rent by the interference of supernatural, transcendent powers and that therefore there is no "miracle" in this sense of the word. Such a miracle would be an event whose cause did not lie within history ... it is in accordance with such a method as this that the science of history goes to work on all historical documents. And there cannot be any exceptions in the case of biblical text if the latter are at all to be understood historically' (Bultmann 1960:291). It is possible to interpret the text historically without following Bultmann down this path, however. Ladd provides a perspective which allows for both rigorous historical analysis and the reality of divine intervention: 'Is there such a God who reveals Himself in history? The historian cannot say, for God is not a historical (sic) character, even though He acts in history. He inhabits eternity. Did God become incarnate in the man Jesus Christ? The historian as a historian has no way to answer this question, for such an incarnation is without analogy. Did God raise Jesus from the dead? The historian can only say that if such an event occurred, it is without historical explanation or historical causality and analogy, and therefore he, as a historian, cannot affirm it. But this is *precisely what Christian faith affirms*: that in the resurrection of Christ an event occurred in history, in time and in space, among men which is without historical explanation or causality, but is a direct unmediated act of God. Indeed, *when the historian can explain the resurrection of Jesus in purely human terms*, those who hold anything like an evangelical faith will be faced with a problem of shattering dimensions' (Ladd 1967:187; emphasis in the original). Thus, social-scientific criticism, as a subset of historical criticism, allows for the possibility of divine interaction in human history, and for miracles, such as the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

between source criticism and redaction criticism is that the redaction critic assumes that sources were altered to conform to the redactors' theological biases, whereas the source critic sees the text as constructed from existing sources, more or less as they were written.

The source critic recognizes that some New Testament material is based on previously existing sources (for example, the assumption that the Gospel of Matthew is based on Mark, and on a document, no longer extant, called Q), edited to create the extant text of the modern New Testament. The goal of the source critic is to derive the interpretation of the text from the form into which the author integrated and edited the sources. As Van Eck writes, '... the narrative world is always a conceptual interpretation of the real, historical, or conceptual world' (1995:73).

Source criticism may be seen as quite compatible with social-scientific criticism, as the source critic keeps the New Testament text in its original social and cultural context. The source critic assumes that the author selects his narrative form in order to best convey the intended meaning, but that the author, text, and audience are nevertheless situated in the social and cultural context of the first-century Mediterranean world.

2.5.3. Form criticism (*Formgeschichte*)

Form criticism began with Hermann Gunkel in 1906, when he classified Old Testament prose narratives into forms: myth, folktale, saga, romance, legend, and history (Tucker 1971:24). Other early form critics included Schmidt, Dibelius, and Bultmann. Dibelius listed five categories of Gospel forms in addition to the passion narrative: paradigms, tales, legends, myths, and exhortations (Travis 1977:155-157).

Perhaps the most influential form critic of the last century was Rudolph Bultmann. Bultmann was an existentialist theologian, influenced by the philosopher Martin

Heidegger¹⁶. Bultmann sought to ‘demythologize’ the New Testament text, that is, not to dismiss it as untrue, but to interpret it as myth. In this respect, the literary form of the pericope in question would be relevant to its interpretation as myth. Bultmann spoke against ‘objectifying’ religious truth by connecting it with historical, ontological reality, such as Jesus Christ (an historical reality, a man) being God. One author has summarized Bultmann’s approach to theology as ‘an effort to find Christian meaning in a gospel which is expressed in unhistorical, mythological categories, which he, as a scientific historian, cannot possibly accept as real events’ (Ladd 1967:185).

Ladd summarizes the central concepts of form criticism thus:

The designation ‘form criticism’ refers to the various literary forms which the oral tradition assumed as it was passed from mouth to mouth. Back of this study was the assumption that certain laws of oral tradition when applied to the Gospels will lead to the recovery of the earliest form of the tradition. A close study of these forms led to the critical conclusion that in its earliest stages, the material in the Gospels was passed on orally as a series of disconnected units, anecdotes, stories, sayings, teachings, parables, and so on.

(Ladd1967:144)

The emphasis in form criticism is on the literary forms which the gospels have come to take, rather than on the theological, historical, or cultural context from which they arise¹⁷. In fact, Webster summarizes Bultmann’s 1921 book *The history of the Synoptic tradition* by stating that for Bultmann ‘the gospels contain almost no authentic historical information about Jesus but rather material shaped and frequently created by the early Christian communities’ (1988:116). Form criticism, as expressed by Bultmann, is not

¹⁶ ‘In Heidegger, hermeneutics becomes still further detached from textuality. The art of understanding or of interpretation now has little to do with the skills cultivated by readers, but is seen as the defining characteristic of specifically human existence. To be human is to understand the potentialities of one’s own being-in-the-world. More specifically, it is to find oneself confronted by the question of being, a question that discloses human nature’s fundamental orientation towards its own authentic form, persisting even in the ordinary state of fallenness. In this ontology of the alienated individual, the loss of the textual focus is also a loss of otherness: for the voice that calls us from our fallenness within the everyday world is the voice of our own true being. Understanding is always ultimately *self*-understanding. Much of this ontology remains intact in Bultmann...’ (Watson 2010:120-121, emphasis in the original).

¹⁷ ‘The task of form criticism is to identify the literary forms of the material, their structures, intentions, and settings, in order to understand the oral or preliterate stage of their development’ (Greidanus n.d.:52-53).

concerned with the interpretation that the original audience might give to a text in its social and cultural context¹⁸, thus,

indications in the Gospels of sequence, time, place, and the like are quite unhistorical and untrustworthy and must therefore be ignored by serious Gospel criticism. As a result, we have no 'life' or 'biography' of Jesus, but only a series of detached anecdotes and teachings artificially and unhistorically strung together.

(Bultmann 1967:145)

Webster has criticized Bultmann's form criticism as lacking 'any ontological reference in its interpretation of the Christian faith, and thus to be radically subjective, translating statements about God into statements about man' (Webster 1988:116). When the text is divorced from any concrete spatial, temporal, or cultural setting, how else could it be interpreted, but subjectively?

Is form criticism compatible with social-scientific criticism? To the extent that form criticism removes the historical, cultural, and social connection between the text and its message, author, and audience, it removes itself from the purpose of social-scientific criticism: to evaluate the text in its social and cultural context. As Ladd writes, '*Form criticism has failed to discover a purely historical Jesus*' (Ladd 1967:157, emphasis in the original). Social-scientific criticism seeks to place Jesus squarely into the social and cultural milieu of the first-century Mediterranean world, and will find little help in this task from form criticism.

2.5.4 Redaction criticism (*Redaktionsgeschichte*)

Redaction criticism developed shortly before the advent of social-scientific criticism, having its roots in the 1960's. Redaction criticism is the view that the New Testament texts are the product of a process of redaction – that is, that they are assembled from source documents into their present form. Redaction criticism assumes that the documents available today are not the documents written by the original authors, but

¹⁸ Perrin writes that '[t]he main purpose for the creation, the circulation, and the use of these forms was not to preserve the history of Jesus, but to strengthen the life of the church. Thus these forms reflect the concern of the church, and both the form and content have been influenced by the faith and theology of the church, as well as by her situation and practice' (Perrin 1969:16).

are the product of revision over time. This revision represents, to a lesser or greater extent, the theological biases of the redactors. Perrin explains:

The redaction critic investigates how smaller units – both simple and composite – from the oral tradition or from written sources were put together to form larger complexes, and he is especially interested in the formation of the Gospels as finished products.

(Perrin 1969: vi)

Redaction criticism begins with the assumption that the New Testament tells the modern reader more about the theology of the redactors, than about the teachings of Christ:

... we must take as our starting point the assumption that the Gospels offer us directly information about the theology of the early church and not about the teaching of the historical Jesus, and that any information we may derive from them about Jesus can only come as a result of the stringent application of very carefully contrived criteria for authenticity.

(Perrin 1969:69)

Early proponents of redaction criticism held out great promise that in this method, a more comprehensive and correct interpretation of the New Testament could be uncovered. One author went so far as to write:

It must be said that the first chapters of all the standard histories of Christian doctrine or Christian theology are already out of date! Nor is it only the histories of Christian theology which are being affected by the development; the standard portrayals of New Testament theology, even Bultmann's, which is by far the most important of them all, are equally out of date insofar as they do not present the synoptic evangelists as major theologians. In this respect the theological world is going to be very seriously affected by the work of the redaction critic and, it is hoped, very considerably helped!

(Perrin 1969:68)

Redaction criticism failed to live up this optimism, as difficulties and weaknesses became apparent. Without access to source documents, redaction critics were left with speculation as to the identities, motives, sources, assumptions, and methods of the redactors. The New Testament text was removed from any definitive social, historical,

or theological context. Without such a context for interpretation, very little in the way of substantive findings were produced from redaction criticism.

Social-scientific critics attempt to place the New Testament text into the very specific cultural, theological, and social context of the ancient Near East; such a context is not possible in redaction criticism. Therefore, it may be said, at the risk of oversimplification, that it would be quite difficult to reconcile redaction criticism with social-scientific criticism at the textual level. Social-scientific criticism relies on the social and cultural context of the author and the audience, but redaction criticism removes the text from these contexts.

2.5.5 Narrative criticism

Narrative criticism is an attempt to interpret the writings of the New Testament, and the Gospels in particular, on the basis of the form of the narrative. Narrative critics ask: 'What, if any, literary models did the authors use in composing their works? How does a presumed genre shape the message which the author presents to the first century reader' (Perkins 1989:296)?

Narrative criticism makes assumptions about the interpretation of the gospel narrative on the basis of prevalent literary forms. These assumptions may significantly influence the narrative critic's reading of the text. For example:

Attention to ancient literary patterns may prevent the exegete from drawing false conclusions about the significance of particular features in a gospel. For example, the frequent misunderstanding by Jesus' disciples in Mark are neither historical reports nor the theological devaluation of Christians attached to Jesus as miracle worker. Misunderstanding of divine revelation is characteristic of writings claiming to present revealed teaching throughout the period. As part of the stock literary content one also finds the encounter with hostile authorities and the weaknesses of the followers of the great man.

(Perkins 1989:297)

Narrative criticism is an attempt to interpret the Scriptures in a way that speaks to the depth and commonality of human experience. For the narrative critic, the text is telling a story about human experience, and to reduce the text to mere history or theology is to

do a disservice to the author. The text contains theology and is historically conditioned, but the text is not mere history or theology.

... incorporating the results of historical-critical analysis or by insisting that a method of grasping the text as a narrative whole is the necessary first stage to any other form of analysis that might be pursued using the text as 'data'. Justification for the turn toward narrative in particular often points to the narrative character of human life, which is lived as the embodiment of stories on both the personal and national level. Narrative permits a rendering of the complexity of human lives and choice, as well as the dynamic engagement of readers in responding to the story, that is lost with the translation of the NT into evidence for historical events or theological concepts. Narrative criticism seeks to facilitate entry into the complexity of the narrative world, not exit from it into history or theology.

(Perkins 1989:299-300)

Narrative criticism seeks to interpret the text as an experience into which the audience enters, a dialogue, as it were, with the narrator.

A narrative creates its audience in the assumptions that it makes about the values and belief which the world of the narrative presumes to be true, through remarks that the narrator addresses to the audience and in numerous assumptions an author makes about what the audience knows.

(Perkins 1989:300-301)

In this respect, social-scientific criticism can be a strong complement to narrative criticism. Social-scientific criticism can provide the narrative critic with insight into the social and cultural world in which the narrative is conceived; the assumptions the author makes about what the audience knows. These assumptions are conditioned by the social institutions present in the mind of the author and the audience, and present in the narrative. Narrative criticism refers to what is called the strategy of the text in social-scientific criticism.

2.5.6 Postmodernist criticism

Postmodern biblical criticism is not a specific approach to the text, such as is found in some other text critical methods, but rather a general application of the philosophy of postmodernism to the Biblical text. Postmodernism has been difficult enough to define philosophically, much less to apply to a specific field, such as biblical criticism, because

it does not subscribe to a singular, overarching set of core principles. In fact, it is a tenet of most postmodern thinkers to reject the validity of such systematic metanarratives:

One account of postmodernism seeks to define it by contrasting it with modern thought. Those who favour this approach associate modern thought with the Enlightenment, and further claim that postmodern thought is premised upon a rejection of the principal values it promoted (such as the valuing of reason over superstition and emotion, the value accorded to independent thought, and the valuing of so-called 'meta-theories', or 'metanarratives' – theories, such as Marxism, that claimed to explain the totality of our experience). According to this way of conceiving the relation between postmodern and modern thought, the former is an inversion of the latter. Postmodern thinkers reject the notion that thought can be completely independent, and they stress instead the different contexts in which thinkers are located. They also tend to deny that the ability to use reason is the most valuable aspect of being human. Finally, postmodern thinkers have abandoned the search for theories capable of explaining 'everything' – in other words, they reject meta-theories or meta-narratives. This last point is the most crucial to this particular construal of postmodernism.

(Harrison 2010:2)

Postmodern philosophy generally rejects the premise that absolute truth exists; rather truth is subject to individual interpretation, and often subjective. This general philosophy applies to postmodern religious thought as well, as Harrison explains:

Religious ideas and practices have been prone to becoming 'free-floating' in postmodernity because in many cases they are no longer tied to religious traditions practiced in particular locales, but have rather become de-localised.... It is such de-localised, de-personalised and de-valued religion that is often regarded as 'postmodern religion'.

(Harrison 2010:4)

Thus the postmodern Biblical critic will draw from a wide range of hermeneutical options when interpreting a text. Postmodernism may draw from historical and social-scientific critical methods, but may find more common ground with interpretive methodologies which are more subjective in nature, such as form criticism or narrative criticism. Aichele *et. al* explain:

Postmodernism is characterized by diversity in both method and content and by an anti-essentialist emphasis that rejects the idea that there is a final account, an assured and agreed-on interpretation, of some one thing—here the biblical text or any part of it. Diversity in postmodernism includes not just different methods of reading and interpreting the Bible but also variety within any one method; narrative

criticism, for example, is not a clear, defined approach that all narrative critics employ in the same fashion. What unites this methodological jumble is agreement that no final or essential interpretation of the text is being produced. Other readings are always possible, and often invited. Postmodernism does not reject the need for rigor in the analysis of actual texts, but it does call for the acknowledgment of one's approach, including its underlying assumptions and its goals and limitations.

(Aichele *et al* 2009:384)

Thus, for the postmodern Biblical critic, social-scientific criticism may be one among many options, but the postmodern critic does not assume that any one particular critical method will yield the 'correct' interpretation; rather, that each critical approach may contribute uniquely toward the ongoing analysis of the biblical text.

2.5.7 Feminist criticism

Feminist criticism is an attempt to interpret the New Testament in a way that represents a uniquely female perspective. Common themes in theological feminism include the idea that the Biblical text represents the views of a male-dominated society, and that such a society is necessarily oppressive to women. The text, therefore, must be reinterpreted to speak clearly to women. The subjectivity of such an approach is immediately evident: even granting the feminist assumption, it is not clear how the imposition of a female perspective on a text which arises from an oppressive, paternalistic society would yield a greater understanding of the intended meaning of the text. Rather, it seems that the feminist perspective imposed on the text will produce a uniquely feminist interpretation, and if the original authors and audience were paternalistic and oppressive to women, then surely the feminist interpretation is not the original intent of the text.

One feminist author has affirmed this subjectivity as necessary to feminism:

... womanist scholars unashamedly declare that their reading is subjective. Whether it is done in academic institutions or beyond, it is not individualistic; rather, it reflects their corporate subjectivity. This interpretation emerges from group experience and is constantly critiqued and validated by the group.

(Barton 2011:61)

Feminist theology can be defined as a form of contextual theology. Bevans defines contextual theology as 'a way of doing theology in which one takes into account: the spirit and message of the gospel; the tradition of the Christian people; the culture in which one is theologising; and social change in that culture' (Bevans 1992:1). Is social-scientific criticism handily compatible with feminist criticism? It would seem that feminist critics are not as much concerned with the interpretation of the text in its original social and social contexts, as with the interpretation of the text in their own social and cultural contexts. Social-scientific criticism is not inherently subjective; rather it seeks to firmly root textual criticism in the time and place, with all the corresponding social realia, of the first-century Mediterranean world, and to derive the interpretation of the text from its meaning in this social and cultural context.

In a sense, social-scientific criticism enables the interpreter to accomplish the goals of feminist criticism; that is, to elucidate those aspects of the text which point to the paternalistic and patriarchal society which gave rise to the text. Therefore, feminist interpretation can make strong use of social-scientific criticism to achieve its goals, at least in part.

2.6 NEW TESTAMENT CRITICISM AND THE PRESENT STUDY

The present study is an attempt to interpret the phenomena of fasting in the New Testament, focusing on the gospels and Acts. To that end, the social-scientific critical method will be a useful approach, as fasting carries social, cultural, and religious connotations which are inherent in the social and cultural context of the first-century Mediterranean world. New Testament texts which relate to fasting will be interpreted using grammatical, historical, and social-scientific analysis, with the goal of determining the author's intended meaning to the original audience. From this interpretation, an attempt will be made to draw applications for the contemporary spiritual practice of fasting within the parameters of Evangelical Christianity.

In order to derive from the New Testament narrative universal theological principles which can be applied to a cultural and social setting foreign to the original author and

audience, it is necessary to view the text as more than mere narrative, or to evaluate only its literary form; rather it is vital to see the text as a narrative which mediates the revelation of God through Jesus and the evangelists. Specifically, this study will proceed from the assumption that the gospel accounts of Jesus' fasting, and Jesus' teaching about fasting, are rooted in the historical ministry of Jesus, and are not the product of redaction or the construction of the early Christian community. The gospels, in this study, are assumed to be a reliable source of information about Jesus' ministry and teaching. Additionally, the gospels represent the relevant social scripts regarding fasting in the first-century Mediterranean world, which are appropriate source documents for the present study.

There are several reasons that this view is appropriate for a study such as this one. They are delineated below.

- The final goal of this study is to draw theological and spiritual applications about fasting for Christians in the Evangelical tradition. Christians in this tradition see the gospels as accurate, reliable accounts of the life and teaching of Jesus. Therefore, any attempt to construct a theology for Evangelicals which does not share this starting point is likely to be short lived.
- This assumption allows the Biblical critic to apply the social-scientific critical method. The gospel text is firmly rooted in the culture of the first-century Mediterranean world, so certain social realia may be taken into account, such as the social institutions discussed above. If the gospel narrative is assumed to be the product of redaction or construction by later Christian communities, then new questions appear which render the application of social-scientific methods unfeasible. Specifically, it is difficult to know the social realia of the author and audience, since a definite social context is lost. Who were the authors? Who was the audience? What did the author assume that the audience knew? And how might the first-century Mediterranean context of the gospels be distorted? These questions cannot be readily answered, and therefore, application of social-scientific principles will be necessarily subjective.

- This assumption allows the analysis of the literary forms of the text, without elevating the form of the text above its content. Different literary genres within the New Testament, such as historical accounts of Jesus' fasting in the gospels or the apostles' fasting in Acts, or sermon material, or parables, are interpreted according to their genre, but it is not assumed that the genre contains within itself the interpretation of the text.
- As expressed in Chapter 1, this study is intended as a work of both scholarship and piety. The author's theological commitment dictates a serious interpretation of the extant text, with its textual tradition.

2.7 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This Chapter discussed the history, methods, and assumptions of social-scientific criticism. Social-scientific criticism was defined, including the relationship of social-scientific models, such as structural functionalism, conflict, and symbolism, to the interpretation of the New Testament text. Social institutions relevant to the current study and representative of the institutions studied by social-scientific critics were discussed, specifically the social institutions of honor and shame, individuality and collectivism, and limited good. Next, a brief literary history of the social-scientific method was outlined, from early applications of social science to the biblical text, to the discipline as currently expressed. Then social-scientific criticism was placed into the context of other prominent contemporary hermeneutical methodologies, in order to provide a broader understanding of social-scientific criticism's place in the spectrum of options for the modern biblical critic. Finally the critical approach of the present study was articulated.

The next Chapter will provide an overview of the practice of fasting in the ancient world. The overarching purpose of this study is to interpret the practice of fasting in the New Testament in its social and cultural contexts, but of course even the context has a context. The first-century Mediterranean world was influenced by the Mesopotamian, Hellenic, and Roman cultures, and most significantly, by Judaism. The following Chapter will discuss fasting in these cultures, and in the Old Testament.

Chapter 3

Fasting in the Old Testament and ancient Mediterranean world

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the present study is to examine fasting in the New Testament in its historical, social, and cultural contexts. To that end, this Chapter will provide a context for first-century Mediterranean fasting through an examination of fasting in the cultures which contributed to the cultural milieu of the New Testament world. First, two general principles of religious fasting will be observed; namely, that religious fasting is a nearly universal religious phenomenon, and second, that religious fasting is often a means of identifying oneself with a larger community (see the concept of *dyad* in §– 2.3.2). With these two points in mind, fasting in the Old Testament will be examined, comprising of ritual fasting as prescribed in the Law of Moses, individual instances of fasting, and corporate fasting in times of national crisis. Fasting during the exile will be found to be particularly significant, as Jewish practices and beliefs come into close contact with Babylonian and Medo-Persian ascetic practices. Fasting in ancient Greece, which held significant political and intellectual sway over the Mediterranean world immediately preceding the rise of the Roman Empire, will also be examined. Finally, fasting in Roman culture will be examined. Each of these cultures contributed to Jewish identity and observance in the first century. The purpose of this Chapter is to provide a probable theological, social and cultural context for fasting in the time of the Gospels and Acts.

3.1.1 The universality of religious fasting

An examination of the religious and cultural roots of fasting in the New Testament is to be found in the Judaism of the Old Testament, as well as the cultures which influenced the Mediterranean world in the first century. However, fasting as a religious phenomenon is not restricted to this region, or to these cultures. Brongers places Israelite fasting into the broader context of fasting in ancient religions:

As a matter of fact fasting is by no means a [*sic*] Israelite monopoly. From earliest antiquity peoples scattered all over the world have, for one reason or another, abstained themselves from food and drink for a shorter or longer time, as individuals or as a community. Instances collected from many books on ethnology and history of religion are abundant. They all demonstrate such a variety of forms and practices that it is almost impossible to classify them....

(Brongers 1977:1)

Religious fasting is a nearly universal religious practice, as Tamney points out:

The history of fasting can be interpreted using Bellah's (1964) theory of religious evolution. Leaving aside two of Bellah's categories which can be considered transitional (i.e., archaic, early modern), religious history can be divided into three stages: primitive, historic, and modern. In the primitive stage, religious actions, such as fasting, are acts of identification or participation in the sacred. In the historic stage, religious actions are means of salvation; through such acts people atone for failures or sins and express their submission to a sacred order. In the modern period, the key characteristic is multiplicity; formerly religious acts are interpreted from a variety of perspectives (Bellah, 1964:363-371). This framework also seems to fit the history of fasting. In the primitive context, fasting was associated with purification and preparation for receiving sacred power – "throughout the world of primitive man, the basic motives of fasting – purity, strength, and mysticism – remain remarkably universal" (Rogers 1976:32). Fasting was a means of participating in the sacred, one effect of which was increased strength or power¹⁹.

(Tamney 1986:1)

Thus when the ancient Jews fasted under the guidance of the Mosaic Law, or participated in acts of spontaneous fasting for protection or as a sign of repentance, they were not committing a distinctly Jewish act, though the theology behind the act of fasting may have been unique to their religious situation. One purpose of this Chapter is to interpret Jewish fasting in the Old Testament, as a predecessor to fasting in the New Testament, within the context of fasting as a universal religious practice.

¹⁹ Tamney elaborates on the application of fasting to later Christianity: 'With the growth of ethical religions in the historic context, fasting became "an expression of an attitude of mind... of pious humility or penitence towards the deity"' (Wagtendonk 1965:25). Henisch's (1976) analysis of attitudes toward fasting in medieval society illustrates the classical Christian perspective. Fasting was considered a mortification, an act of penance for one's sins. Because food was attractive, it could be a distraction. So one fasted to discipline desire, attain detachment from daily life, and focus on the religious quest. In medieval society fasting was a religious act, embedded in religious mythology. 'A diet attempted for any reason other than spiritual improvement, and in particular such irrelevancies as health and beauty, was nothing but a mockery' (Henisch 1976:29). According to classical Christianity then, fasting was primarily an act of penance with the secondary purpose of detaching us from the things of this world to free us for the worship of God (Tamney 1986:1-2).

3.1.2 Fasting and communal identity

One reason for fasting as a universal or nearly universal religious phenomenon may be found in the social realia which form the basis for primitive societies. Specifically, the idea that one's identity is to be found in one's dyad (see §– 2.3.2) means that conformity to the dietary, cultural, and hygienic practices of the dyad constitute an important set of norms, to which individuals feel a strong compulsion to conform. That is to say, eating a certain food, or abstaining from it, are cultural acts in societies which place great value on conformity to cultural standards. Quite literally, these societies believe that 'you are what you eat', so dietary norms are strictly enforced in the name of preserving the unique identity of the group. Rosenbaum elaborates:

According to the anthropologist Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney, for food to function as a metaphor of "Self," it requires "two interlocking dimensions. First, each member of the social group consumes the food' – to which I would add, or does not consume the food – "which becomes part of his or her body. The important food becomes embodied in each individual. It operates as a metonym for being part of the self. Second, the food is" – or is not – "consumed by individual members of the social group who eat the food together."

(Rosenbaum 2010:1)

Rosenbaum explains this in the context of the Jewish prohibition on eating pigs:

By refusing to eat pig, Jews are never able to ingest Romanness and thus can never truly become Roman. On the other hand, according to some rabbinic sources, because Romans eat pig they are, as such, embodied as pigs. Once again, to quote Ohnuki-Tierney: "The beauty and purity of *we* are *embodied doubly in the body of the people and in the food that represents them*, and, conversely, the undesirable qualities of the other are embodied in *their* foods and foodway." The act of eating pork is thus understood as embodying, but the individual and corporate body that this practice creates is construed as positive by Roman sources and negative by early Jewish and rabbinic sources.

(Rosenbaum 2010:2)

Thus dietary restrictions formed an important aspect of the cultural identity of a people group. This will be seen to be particularly important in the context of the Jews in exile and under subjection, alternately, to the Babylonians, the Medo-Persians, the Greeks, and the Romans. In the first-century Mediterranean world of the New Testament, the

Jews had a particular interest in maintaining the uniqueness of their culture in the face of Roman occupation. This may be seen in a number of examples in the gospels.²⁰

Jager writes that food consumption takes place within the 'larger context of intersubjective relationships' (Jager 1999:1), and points out that reciprocity and hospitality, which are intimately connected with healthy, happy food consumption, are powerful humanizing forces. Thus, in cultures which operate under the social realia discussed in the previous Chapter, fasting, feasting, and dietary choices are not purely personal, subjective matters, but serve to situate the individual into the larger context of his or her dyad, and to preserve the honor of the dyad by protecting the identity of the group.

3.1.3 Food in the first-century Mediterranean world

In order to grasp the cultural and social significance of fasting in the first-century Mediterranean world, it is necessary to establish the role of food in this society. The first-century Mediterranean world was a primarily agrarian society, supplemented by marine resources from the Mediterranean Sea, as well as other bodies of water such as the Sea of Galilee. Many of Jesus' parables allude to the agrarian and maritime economy of his audience.²¹ The significance of the means of production of food cannot be overstated in a discussion of any economy or society, but food production is particularly important in a subsistence society such as that of the first-century Mediterranean world. As Smith and Munro point out, 'agricultural production provided the foundation for the development and maintenance of state-level societies in the Near East' (2009:1).

²⁰ For example, the question of paying taxes to Caesar is addressed in Matthew 22:13-22, Mark 12:13-17, and Luke 20:19-26. Jesus' alleged usurpation of Roman authority is a charge brought against Jesus in Luke 23:2, and allegiance to Caesar is used by the Jews as leverage against Pilate in John 19:12.

²¹ See, for example, the parable of the sower in Matthew 13:18-23, the parable of the wheat and the tares in Matthew 13:24-30 and 36-43, the parable of the mustard seed in Matthew 13:31-32, the parable of the hidden treasure in Matthew 13:44, the parable of the costly pearl in Matthew 13:45-46, and the parable of the dragnet in Matthew 13:47-50.

First-century Mediterranean people lived on a simple diet of locally available foods, including grains and garden vegetables, fruits, dairy, meat, fish, and oils and wines.

The traditional Mediterranean diet is characterized by a high intake of vegetables, pulses, fruits, nuts, cereals, a high intake of olive oil but a low intake of saturated fats, a moderately high intake of fish, a low-to moderate intake of dairy products (yogurt and cheese), meat (in small quantities), and a regular but moderate intake of wine generally during meals.

(Tur *et al.* 2004:1)

The peasants of the first-century Mediterranean world lived at the level of subsistence, and were intimately connected to the means of production, as Galil *et al* point out:

The traditional Mediterranean subsistence base has only a few major components: the cultivation of grains and legumes; the husbandry of sheep, goats, pigs and cattle for various purposes (meat, milk, wool, and traction); and the cultivation of orchards – not only grapevines and olive groves, but also an array of other fruit trees (almonds, figs), green vegetables and condiments in kitchen or market gardens. To this terrestrial economy, marine resources should be added as they play an integral role in the traditional Mediterranean mode of subsistence.²²

(Galil *et al* 2002:1)

Some scholars, such as Hamilakis, see patterns of food production and consumption as paradigms for conducting social research theory, supplemented by more traditional historical and social-scientific methods:

I therefore believe that the paradigm of embodiment is an appropriate 'lens' to use in focusing on food consumption. The recent wave of literature on the human body in social theory could provide an invaluable aid in building our archaeological theory on food consumption, but it will have to be enriched with the specificity and materiality of empirical, historically contingent archaeological data.

(Hamilakis 1999:2)

Hamilakis underscores the importance of the means of production of food as a powerful cultural and social phenomenon, which cannot be divorced from the larger social realia at work in a given culture. He points out that food consumption in cultures like that of the first-century Mediterranean world was not merely a means of nourishment, but carried immense social import as well:

²² See also Braudel (1972:103-62) and Butzer (1996).

I would argue that a theoretically informed archaeology of food should reinstate the study of food production by avoiding the optimization and maximization fallacies (which portray prehistoric people as modern specialists in microeconomics!); it would view food processing and preparation not simply as a matter of technical apparatuses, static routine practices and hardware, but as a socially meaningful arena of transformation. More importantly, it would put food consumption at the centre of the enquiry, illuminating issues of demand and desire and appreciating the most crucial point of all: that food consumption acquires such an immense significance and power in societies past and present because it involves (more than many other practices) the human body; it is an expression of human embodiment. Food consumption is primarily an act of incorporation which involves emotions, pleasures and feelings. This important aspect, the condition of embodiment and incorporation, is, to a large extent, responsible for the power and multiplicity of meanings attributed to food: the fears and the taboos against certain food items which are banned from crossing the boundaries between the body and the outside world; the immense importance of the mouth, an importance which is sometimes transferred metonymically to material culture objects such as pots, with their highly decorated mouth; the development of the transformative technologies of food which can be seen as a process of purification before food is incorporated into the body; the mnemonic character of food, the bodily experience of the sight, the smell, and the taste of food which evokes the senses and generates remembering; the creation of time by food and drink events as a consequence of the periodicity of food consumption (partly due to the periodicity of the biological need)²³.

(Hamilakis 1999:3)

Thus, in this study, it will be assumed that the consumption of food, and the abstinence from it in the form of fasting, is not simply related to the physical body, but to the dyad, or the community, and to one's place in it. This will be quite relevant to any attempt at a social-scientific interpretation of fasting in the New Testament. A review of Old Testament literature, as well as references to Babylonian, Greek, and Roman accounts of fasting, will indicate that this view was widespread throughout the cultures that gave rise to the social and cultural milieu of first-century Palestine, and thus to the attitudes of Jesus and his audience toward fasting, as presented in the gospels. Such a review follows.

3.2 FASTING IN THE OLD TESTAMENT: AN OVERVIEW

Culturally and religiously, the greatest influence on the principal actors and audience of the gospels was the Old Testament. It is clear that Jesus saw himself as a Jewish

²³ See also Battaglia (1990), Becker (1995), Connerton (1989), Dobres (1995), Falk (1994) and Seremetakis (1994).

prophet in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets²⁴. Jewish political parties, such as the Pharisees and the Sadducees, were committed to preserving certain aspects of the Jewish Old Testament traditions, such as adherence to the Law of Moses. The religious life of the Temple in Jerusalem was active, and local synagogues promoted Jewish traditions in cities throughout the Mediterranean world. Various sects, such as the Essenes, attempted to isolate themselves from non-Jewish (or impure) aspects of their culture. Thus, among religiously observant Jews in the first-century Mediterranean world, preserving the doctrinal and religious practices of the Old Testament was an important aspect of the preservation of their culture. It follows, then, that fasting in the first-century Mediterranean world of the gospels is influenced greatly by the fasting texts and traditions of the Old Testament.

The following Section will provide an overview of fasting in the Old Testament. It is not the purpose of this study to provide a detailed exegesis of fasting in the Old Testament, but rather in the New Testament. What is necessary for the current study is a review of representative instances of fasting in the Old Testament. Thus, the material which follows will provide a broad, rather than deep, look at fasting in the Old Testament, with the purpose of providing a cultural and theological context for understanding first-century Jewish attitudes toward fasting which inform instances of, and teaching about, fasting in the New Testament.

3.2.1 Genesis 2:16-17

The LORD God commanded the man, saying, “From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die.”

(Genesis 2:16-17)

²⁴ For example, Matthew 10:40-41 (‘He who receives you receives Me, and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me. He who receives a prophet in *the* name of a prophet shall receive a prophet’s reward; and he who receives a righteous man in the name of a righteous man shall receive a righteous man’s reward’) and Mark 6:4 (‘Jesus said to them, “A prophet is not without honor except in his hometown and among his *own* relatives and in his *own* household”).

The creation accounts in Genesis, which were fundamental to Judaism and later to Christianity, begin with an account of YHWH's creation of the earth and all in it, and the declaration that it was 'good' or 'very good'. YHWH passes moral judgment on his creation, and finds it acceptable. Only two things are initially presented as unacceptable in the sight of YHWH in the earliest creation account – eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gn 2:16-17), and Adam remaining alone without a mate (Gn 2:18). Thus, the creation account situates humanity clearly in context in the created order: the world is good, created for man's sustenance, and man is a social creature with complex emotional needs which are only met through intimacy and companionship with others. These few verses address the most basic physical and social needs of humanity.

Fasting is not enjoined in YHWH's command to abstain from eating the tree of the knowledge of good and evil – Adam, and later Eve, is free to eat from all other trees. It is interesting to note that the first command of YHWH is a dietary restriction, and the first sin is a violation of a dietary law. As Sarna points out, 'Man is called upon by God to exercise restraint and self-discipline in the gratification of his appetite. This prohibition is the paradigm for the future Torah legislation relating to the dietary laws' (Sarna 1989:21).

Genesis 3 records the temptation of Eve by the serpent, the subsequent sin and fall of Adam and Eve, and YHWH's prescribed punishment. It is interesting to note the nature of the serpent's temptation of Eve. Genesis 3:6 records that 'When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make *one* wise, she took from its fruit and ate...' The apostle John would later write about the universality of temptation in human experience: 'For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world' (1 Jn 2:16). It is not difficult to see the correlation between the serpent's temptation of Eve and John's three categories of temptation: the lust of the flesh ('the tree was good for food'), the lust of the eyes ('it was a delight to the eyes'), and the pride of life ('the tree was desirable to make one wise'). Readers of

Matthew's gospel who were familiar with the Genesis account would recognize these themes again in the temptation of Jesus in Matthew 4, as Jesus is tempted to turn stones into bread (lust of the flesh), to rule the cities of the world (lust of the eyes), and to attain praise through miraculous means (the pride of life).

The abstention, temptation, and sin of Genesis 2 and 3 provide a backdrop for Jesus' fasting and temptation at the beginning of his ministry in Matthew 4. In each case, one finds abstention from food, temptation according to the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, and a response to the temptation. In the case of Adam and Eve, the response is sin. Jesus' response is obedience to the Father, and the holiness that follows. In consequence of their sin, Adam and Eve were expelled from the garden of Eden; in consequence of his obedience, Jesus was fed and ministered to by angels. This comparison will be drawn in sharper detail in Section 4.2.3 of this study – it is mentioned here to note that while Genesis 2 and 3 do not comprise a 'fasting text', this text is significant for later Jewish and Christian understandings of the relationship of humanity to food and to God, and forms a backdrop for the messianic ministry of Jesus.

The apocryphal book *The Life of Adam and Eve* relates this text to fasting quite clearly, recording that Adam undertook a penitential forty day fast after the fall (6:1). Some versions also state that Eve fasted forty four days (Anderson & Stone, 1999). Thus, while fasting is not explicit in the Genesis account, some later Jewish authors related this account to fasting in the tradition of Moses and Elijah.

3.2.2 Leviticus 16:29-32

This shall be a permanent statute for you: in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall humble your souls and not do any work, whether the native, or the alien who sojourns among you; for it is on this day that atonement shall be made for you to cleanse you; you will be clean from all your sins before the LORD. It is to be a sabbath of solemn rest for you, that you may humble your souls; it is a permanent statute.

(Leviticus 16:29-32)

Fasting is not specifically enjoined in this passage, but is implied. The Day of Atonement is a 'sabbath of solemn rest', which includes, as the above text twice alludes, humbling one's soul. As Barker and Kohlenberger explain, fasting is the implied means of humbling the soul in this context:

The phrase "deny yourselves" probably signifies fasting. It is used in conjunction with fasting in Ps 35:13 and in parallel with fasting in Isa 58:3 (where in both instances it is referred to as humbling). But as the context in Isa 58 shows, God's injunction was not for mere external fasting but for fasting as an accompaniment of true repentance and new obedience.

(1994:145)

It is clear from Josephus that the Jews of the first century interpreted the self-imposed humility of the Day of Atonement as a fast. Josephus refers to the Day of Atonement as 'the fast', signifying that Jews in his time fasted on the Day of Atonement. He describes the practice of the fast and the sacrifices of the Day of Atonement in his time:

On the tenth day of the same lunar month, they fast till the evening; and this day they sacrifice a bull, and two rams, and seven lambs, and a kid of the goats, for sins. And, besides these, they bring two kids of the goats; the one of which is sent alive out of the limits of the camp into the wilderness for the scapegoat, and to be an expiation for the sins of the whole multitude; but the other is brought into a place of great cleanness, within the limits of the camp, and is there burnt, with its skin, without any sort of cleansing. With this goat was burnt a bull, not brought by the people, but by the high priest, at his own charges; which, when it was slain, he brought of the blood into the holy place, together with the blood of the kid of the goats, and sprinkled the ceiling with his finger seven times, as also its pavement, and again as often toward the most holy place, and about the golden altar: he also at last brings it into the open court, and sprinkles it about the great altar. Besides this, they set the extremities, and the kidneys, and the fat, with the lobe of the liver, upon the altar. The high priest likewise presents a ram to God as a burnt-offering.

(Josephus 3.240)

Hvalvik, in writing about the state of Judaism in the second century CE, indicates that the Jews historically interpreted the Day of Atonement as a fasting day, and placed greater emphasis on fasting than the biblical account indicates: 'In the Pentateuch fasting is a minor subject, primarily connected with the Day of Atonement ... Judaism in antiquity attached much more importance to fasting than did the Pentateuch' (1996:95-96).

Thus, the Day of Atonement is the only permanently established annual fast in the Old Testament, and in the time of the Gospels, was clearly interpreted as a fast. The fast coincided with a time of national repentance, worship, and sacrifices to YHWH.

3.2.3 Deuteronomy 9:9-19

When I went up to the mountain to receive the tablets of stone, the tablets of the covenant which the LORD had made with you, then I remained on the mountain forty days and nights; I neither ate bread nor drank water. “The LORD gave me the two tablets of stone written by the finger of God; and on them *were* all the words which the LORD had spoken with you at the mountain from the midst of the fire on the day of the assembly...

(Deuteronomy 9:9-10)

I took hold of the two tablets and threw them from my hands and smashed them before your eyes. “I fell down before the LORD, as at the first, forty days and nights; I neither ate bread nor drank water, because of all your sin which you had committed in doing what was evil in the sight of the LORD to provoke Him to anger. “For I was afraid of the anger and hot displeasure with which the LORD was wrathful against you in order to destroy you, but the LORD listened to me that time also”.

(Deuteronomy 9:17-19)

The two forty day fasts of Moses in Deuteronomy 9 are significant events in the history of the Jewish people. Moses is recorded as having fasted from food and water for forty days on the mountain, alone with YHWH, culminating in the reception of the law and specifically, the Decalogue on two tablets, written with YHWH’s own hand. Upon returning from this intimate and trying experience with YHWH, Moses found the Israelites participating in a fertility ritual, worshipping a golden calf. In a moment of anger, Moses smashed the tablets of stone, whereupon he immediately returned to the mountain to fast and pray for the deliverance of the people from YHWH’s wrath at their idolatry. As a result of Moses’ intercession, the people were spared.

Several aspects of this fast are significant for the present study. One is that these fasts are depicted as examples of YHWH’s miraculous, sustaining power. Kaiser points out that ‘Moses was able to go for this length of time without food or water was a miracle requiring the Lord’s supernatural care’ (Kaiser 1990:487). It is not clear whether Moses

ate between these two forty day fasts, but in either case, the fasts were beyond ordinary human capacity. These fasts may be seen as symbolic: as YHWH sustained Moses, so will he sustain his people, the Jews.

A second important aspect is that the two fasts were undertaken for different purposes. The first fast preceded YHWH's giving of the Law, while the second was an act of penitence and intercession. Fasting, for Moses, seems to be a significant gesture toward YHWH, and not related to one specific, desired outcome.

A third aspect, which will be developed further in § 4.2.3 of this study, is that these fasts of Moses form an essential element of Moses' typology of the Messiah. In Deuteronomy 18:15, Moses told the people of Israel: 'The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your countrymen, you shall listen to him.' Two later Jewish prophets would engage in 40 day fasts: Elijah in I Kings 19, and Jesus in Matthew 4. The forty day fast became a symbol of the prophetic line of the Messiah. In the New Testament, Moses and Elijah appeared with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-9). These three prophets engaged in the only recorded 40 day fasts in the Old Testament and New Testament. This idea will receive further treatment in Chapter 4, but is significant to note here in the respect that the Jews of the first century would have associated extended fasting with Moses, and with the Messiah who would come after him. This aspect of Jesus' ministry would thus form an association in the minds of his audience with the ministry of Moses, and with the Messiah as foretold by Moses.

3.2.4 1 Samuel 31:11-13 and 2 Samuel 1:1-12

Now when the inhabitants of Jabesh-Gilead heard what the Philistines had done to Saul, all the valiant men rose and walked all night, and took the body of Saul and the bodies of his sons from the wall of Beth-Shan, and they came to Jabesh and burned them there. They took their bones and buried them under the tamarisk tree at Jabesh, and fasted seven days.

(1 Samuel 31:11-13)

Then David took hold of his clothes and tore them, and so also *did* all the men who were with him. They mourned and wept and fasted until evening for Saul and his son Jonathan and for the people of the LORD and the house of Israel, because they had fallen by the sword.

(2 Samuel 1:11-12)

1 Samuel 31:11-13 presents a significant account of fasting in the history of Israel. Saul, the first king of Israel, has been slain in battle, along with his sons, including Jonathan. As a result of Saul's fall, two instances of fasting follow. The first was a week-long fast by the men of Jabesh-Gilead, who conducted a night march to collect the bodies of Saul and his sons. They cremated the bodies, buried the remains, and fasted for seven days. The loyalty of Jabesh-Gilead to Saul is not unexpected, given the events of 1 Samuel 11. This text records that Nahash the Ammonite had laid siege to Jabesh-Gilead, with demands of total surrender and subjugation (1 Sm 11:1-4). Saul, upon receiving this news, raised an army from throughout Israel, organized them into three companies, and conducted a raid of the Ammonite camp, which resulted in the defeat of the Ammonites, and the salvation of the people of Jabesh-Gilead (1 Sm 11:5-11). Immediately following this battle (and as a result of it), Saul was crowned as king of Israel (1 Sm 11:14-15). Now, upon Saul's death, the city he saved mourned him with seven days of fasting. This fasting was not commanded by God, as in the Day of Atonement, nor is it supernatural, as with Moses' fasts on the mountain. Rather, it is a symbol of mourning – a prolonged funeral commemorating the death of a military hero. Its scope, both in terms of the number of participants and the duration of the fast, indicates that it is not a spontaneous act, but a formal act of mourning.

2 Samuel 1:11-12 records a second instance of fasting in response to the death of Saul and his sons. Having received word of Saul's death, David executed the Amalekite who claims to have ended Saul's life in an act of mercy (2 Sm 1:14-16). David and his men tore their clothes and fasted for the remainder of the day. Wevers describes this text as follows:

The double reaction of David to this news has led many to think that 2 traditions are here intertwined... David's immediate reaction is anger against the Amalekite for daring to lay hands on Yahweh's anointed. The surprised Amalekite is killed

forthwith at David's order...The 2nd reaction is one of mourning for Saul, Jonathan, and the defeated Israelites – a mourning imposed on the camp for the day.

(Wevers 1971:170)

Thus, in this text, fasting is an act of mourning, and is coupled with an act of justice. David's fasting appears spontaneous, unlike that of the inhabitants of Jabesh-Gilead. The text records that David's fasting was accompanied by mourning and weeping, and lasted for the duration of the day.

The fasts in response to the death of Saul provide useful information about fasting in the Old Testament. In a time of national or local tragedy, fasting was used as an act of formal grieving, performed *en masse*, and for a prolonged time²⁵. Fasting was also practiced in smaller, more intimate groups as a visceral response to grief or sorrow. Thus, fasting was both a corporate and a personal representation of sorrow or grief.

3.2.5 2 Samuel 12:16-20

David therefore inquired of God for the child; and David fasted and went and lay all night on the ground. The elders of his household stood beside him in order to raise him up from the ground, but he was unwilling and would not eat food with them. Then it happened on the seventh day that the child died. And the servants of David were afraid to tell him that the child was dead, for they said, "Behold, while the child was *still* alive, we spoke to him and he did not listen to our voice. How then can we tell him that the child is dead, since he might do *himself* harm!" But when David saw that his servants were whispering together, David perceived that the child was dead; so David said to his servants, "Is the child dead?" And they said, "He is dead." So David arose from the ground, washed, anointed *himself*, and changed his clothes; and he came into the house of the LORD and worshiped. Then he came to his own house, and when he requested, they set food before him and he ate.

(2 Samuel 12:16-20)

David, having committed adultery with Bathsheeba resulting in her pregnancy (2 Sm 11:4-5), plotted to have her husband Uriah killed in battle to avoid the scandal of the discovery of the affair. The order was carried out by Joab (2 Sm 11:14-17). In this text,

²⁵ See also Jonah 3:5-9 for another example of national fasting in the Old Testament, though not by Jews. The response of the Ninevites to the message of Jonah indicates that fasting was a widespread sign of mourning or repentance in the ancient Near East.

the child has been born, and is near death. David is depicted in the text as interceding for the child's life, and refusing to eat. After seven days, the child died, whereupon David rose, bathed, worshipped, and then broke his fast, requesting a meal.

Fasting in this text is implied as an aid to David's prayer that God's judgment on his sin be abated. As Wevers writes:

David, by strict fasting and intercessory prayer, tries to dissuade Yahweh. Even the chieftains of his family are unable to persuade David to eat. When the child does die after 6 days, David's servants are afraid that he may be deranged by grief; but to their surprise, and contrary to oriental custom, he ends his fast, arises from the ground, washes, and changes.... David is now fully reconciled with God.

(Wevers 1971:176, emphasis in the original)

Rather than fasting in mourning for the death of the child, David has fasted in intercession for the child's life. Upon the death of the child, David ceases his fasting and intercession, and worships YHWH. Fasting in this instance is clearly not a sign of grief at the loss of loved one as when David fasted at the death of Saul (2 Sm 1); rather, it is a demonstration of David's earnestness in prayer. It is a sign of the seriousness with which he intercedes for the life of the child. Fasting, then, is depicted in the Old Testament as an accessory to prayer, adding moral weight and gravity to the prayer²⁶.

3.2.6. 1 Kings 21:27-29

It came about when Ahab heard these words, that he tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and fasted, and he lay in sackcloth and went about despondently. Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying, "Do you see how Ahab has humbled himself before Me? Because he has humbled himself before Me, I will not bring the evil in his days, but I will bring the evil upon his house in his son's days."

(1 Kings 21:27-29)

²⁶ Hannah is depicted as both fasting (1 Sm 1:7-8) and as praying fervently (1 Sm 1:10). It appears in the text that Hannah's fasting was a response to antagonism and sorrow, and corresponded to her annual visits to the temple (1 Sm 1:7). However, in the instance which resulted in the conception of Samuel, she was not fasting – she ate before she prayed (1 Sm 1:9).

The account of king Ahab's fasting in 1 Kings 21:27-29 presents a picture of fasting as a means of demonstrating repentance and forestalling divine judgment. In the text, Ahab coveted a vineyard owned by Naboth. He attempted to purchase the vineyard from Naboth, who refused to sell it (1 Ki 21:1-4). Ahab's wife, Jezebel, devised a plot to murder Naboth as a traitor and a blasphemer (1 Ki 21:5-14). When Naboth was killed, the king took possession of the vineyard as his own (1 Ki 21:15-16). The prophet Elijah came to Ahab, condemned his sin, and pronounced judgment on his house (1 Ki 21:17-24). At this point, the author of the text inserts a parenthetical note about Ahab's character, before recounting Ahab's response to Elijah's prophecy:

Surely there was no one like Ahab who sold himself to do evil in the sight of the LORD, because Jezebel his wife incited him. He acted very abominably in following idols, according to all that the Amorites had done, whom the LORD cast out before the sons of Israel.

(1 Kings 21:25-26)

Ahab responded with typical demonstrations of repentance common to the Jews of his day – fasting and wearing sackcloth. Verse 27 records that he 'went about despondently.' As a result of Ahab's show of repentance, YHWH tells Elijah that his predicted judgment will come to the house of Ahab during his son's rule, rather than his own (1 Ki 21:28-29).

There is no textual evidence that Ahab returned the vineyard to Naboth's family, nor that he paid restitution for Naboth's murder. Rather, it appears that this was an episode of sincere (Ahab has 'humbled himself before' YHWH in vs. 29), but temporary repentance. Patterson and Austell write:

The king's remorse was sincere; paradoxically Ahab could be influenced for good by the divine message... There is little indication, however, that Ahab's basic character was altered so as to produce that godly repentance and genuine faith that lead to a real conversion experience.

(Patterson & Austell 1988:160)

This text indicates that YHWH recognized fasting and humility, albeit without other representations of sincere repentance. Fasting, in this text, is a means of forestalling

judgment. Ahab did not fast in sorrow for his murder and theft, but in fear of divine judgment. Ahab is depicted as fasting, but is not held up, like Moses, Elijah, or Esther, as a fasting hero of the Hebrew people. Where Moses, Elijah, and Esther were revered for their piety and close connection to YHWH, it is written of Ahab that 'Ahab the son of Omri did evil in the sight of the LORD more than all who were before him (1 Ki 16:30). The book of 1 Kings presents a continuous account of Ahab's rivalry with Elijah – Ahab is contrasted with Elijah, as a foil character. Where Elijah is holy, Ahab is wicked. Where Elijah is bold, Ahab is cowardly. Where Elijah is honored by YHWH, Ahab is condemned for idolatry. Thus, this account of Ahab's fasting is not held up as an example of the ascetic piety of a man of God, as with other Old Testament characters. Rather, the emphasis here should be placed on the grace and long-suffering of YHWH, rather than the personal piety of Ahab.

3.2.7 Ezra 8:21-23

Then I proclaimed a fast there at the river of Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God to seek from Him a safe journey for us, our little ones, and all our possessions. For I was ashamed to request from the king troops and horsemen to protect us from the enemy on the way, because we had said to the king, "The hand of our God is favorably disposed to all those who seek Him, but His power and His anger are against all those who forsake Him." So we fasted and sought our God concerning this *matter*, and He listened to our entreaty.

(Ezra 8:21-23)

The return from exile in Babylon (and later Medo-Persia) was a turning point in the history of the Jewish people, and fasting is featured prominently in the accounts of Ezra and Nehemiah, who led in the return to Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the wall and the temple. Given the opportunity to return to Jerusalem, the exiles experienced an increased interest in, and observance of, aspects of the law, such as Sabbath observance, ritual purity, and prayer and fasting. Fasting during the exile seems to be primarily ritual fasting commemorating significant dates in the recent history of Israel (see § 3.2.12, below, on Zechariah 7 and 8), though certain significant exceptions occur, including Daniel's abstention from Babylonian foods (Dn 1:8), though this is not,

strictly speaking, a case of fasting. Esther fasted for the salvation of the Jewish people, and Ezra and Nehemiah fasted for divine protection on their respective journeys to Jerusalem. Edwin Yamauchi describes the exiles' interest in the law:

Deprived of the temple, the exiles laid emphasis on the observation of the Sabbath, on the laws of purity, on prayer and confession (Dan. 9, Ezra 9, Neh. 9), and on fasting to commemorate the tragic events of the Babylonian attacks (Zech. 7:3,5; 8:19). The exiles placed great stress on studying and expounding the Torah, as we see in the description of Ezra, the scribe as "a teacher well versed in the Law of Moses" (Ezra 7:6).

(Yamauchi 2004:15-16)

South African scholar F. Charles Fensham places Ezra's fast into the larger context of his return to Jerusalem, and to Ezra's view of fasting as an element of seeking divine protection:

This passage has a strong religious orientation, as we may expect from Ezra, who lived according to the requirements of the law. He proclaimed a fast at the Ahava River, quite probably immediately after the arrival of the Levites and temple servants. Fasting was accompanied by prayer. The prayer here was a humble supplication to God to assist them on their journey, especially since whole families were returning. *The weak* (Heb. *tap*) literally means small children, but this term has also a wider scope of meaning, and scholars²⁷ hold that it refers here to all the weak returnees, like women, children, and the aged.

(Fensham1982:116)

Ezra's fast was clearly a calculated decision, based on both his confidence in YHWH's protection, and his shame at the thought of relying on an armed escort for protection. Yamauchi seems to dismiss this deliberateness when he writes 'Fasting implies an earnestness that makes one oblivious to food' (Yamauchi 1988:660). The fast declared by Ezra was not merely an abstention from food caused by preoccupation or earnestness, but a deliberate decision – a decree, with a specific purpose in mind. Clearly, Ezra and his contemporaries saw fasting as way to entreat divine protection for a purpose which they believed to be under divine sanction. Like Nehemiah after them, they were willing to bet their lives on the protection of YHWH, and viewed fasting as a form of solicitation of YHWH's favor and protection. The author of the text explicitly links

²⁷ See Myers (1965).

fasting to YHWH's answer to the prayer: 'So we fasted and sought our God concerning this matter, and He listened to our entreaty' (Ezr 8:23).

Ezra also places fasting into the context of YHWH's honor (and his own), stating that because of his previous assertion of confidence in YHWH's protection, he was ashamed to ask the king for an armed escort (Ezr 8:22). From the context of the text, Ezra would have been dishonored, and YHWH by extension, by reliance on the protection of a foreign king. YHWH was not in need of a foreign king for the protection of his emissaries. Fasting is presented as part of a paradox which is repeated throughout the Bible: honor is gained through humility²⁸. Through the self-imposed humility of fasting, Ezra and his companions would receive the honor of divine protection (Ezr 8:21).

Thus, fasting was seen as a means of invoking divine protection, and is connected with the honor of YHWH and of those who engage in fasting. This connection to honor will be found to be significant in a social-scientific interpretation of fasting in the New Testament.

3.2.8 Nehemiah 1:4-7

When I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days; and I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven. I said, "I beseech You, O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who preserves the covenant and loving-kindness for those who love Him and keep His commandments, let Your ear now be attentive and Your eyes open to hear the prayer of Your servant which I am praying before You now, day and night, on behalf of the sons of Israel Your servants, confessing the sins of the sons of Israel which we have sinned against You; I and my father's house have sinned. "We have acted very corruptly against You and have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the ordinances which You commanded Your servant Moses.

(Nehemiah 1:4-7)

Nehemiah, 'the cupbearer to the king' (Neh 1:11), has occasion in this text to hear news of Jerusalem, and finds that the city lies in ruins, its walls crushed and its gates burned

²⁸ Perhaps the most explicit statement of this principle is found in Mark 9:33-37, in which Jesus states that whoever wants to be first must become the servant of all, and presents a child as example of those who should be served.

(Neh 1:1-3). His response is twofold: weeping and mourning, and prayer and fasting. Fasting is clearly linked to prayer in this text ('fasting and praying before the God of heaven), rather than with mourning ('I sat down and wept and mourned for days'). It appears that Nehemiah's initial, visceral response was to weep and mourn, and that this response lasted for days. His continuous response was fasting and prayer, and a representative prayer is provided in the text. 'This prayer has a simple structure. It starts with an invocation of God, proceeds to a confession of sins, then a request of the Lord to remember his people, and concludes with a request for success' (Fensham 1982:154). From the structure of the text, it does not appear that Nehemiah's fasting was associated with his initial mourning and weeping, but with his ongoing prayer for the forgiveness and restoration of Jerusalem. As Yamauchi notes: 'During the exile fasting became a common practice, including solemn fasts to commemorate the taking of Jerusalem and the murder of Gedaliah' (Yamauchi 1988:681).

Lipton notes a difference between signs of sorrow which can be controlled and are volitional, and those which are spontaneous:

Mechanical responses, such as fasting or tonsorial changes, are more likely controllable and thus more likely to be ritual than emotional, though clearly a response that begins as ritual may accumulate emotion. As for collective mourning, it was a standard ancient Near Eastern response to national crisis, as we see in the Hebrew Bible (Jer. ix 16-21, Ez. xxvii 30-32, Zech. xii, Ezra 9:3-7) and beyond (the 'Prophecy of Nefertiti').

(Lipton 2006:186-187)

It appears from Nehemiah's testimony that he experienced both kinds of sorrow here: an initial period of weeping and fasting (emotional), and a prolonged period of fasting and prayer (volitional). In some Old Testament texts fasting are portrayed as an emotional manifestation of sorrow²⁹, while in others, it is a calculated manifestation of

²⁹ For example, David weeps and fasts upon learning of Saul's death in 2 Samuel 1:11-12.

the earnestness of one's prayer³⁰. In Nehemiah's case, fasting seems to fall into the latter category.

3.2.9 Esther 4

A good portion of the Old Testament fasting narrative was written in the context of the Babylonian exile. From 586 BCE, Israel lived in subjection to the Babylonians the Medo-Persians the Greeks, and, in the time of the New Testament, the Romans. Fasting becomes a more prominent religious practice within Judaism in exile than in times of national peace, independence, and prosperity. Fasting in exile is a significant topic for consideration in an examination of fasting in the New Testament, as Jews in the time of the gospels lived under Roman occupation. Esther's fasting for the salvation of the Jewish people became a significant theme in the practice of Judaism in the first century, as it was commemorated in the Feast of Purim. In the first century C.E., the Jewish historian Josephus dedicated a significant portion of Chapter 11 of his *Antiquities* to the account of Esther's deliverance of the Jewish people. He concludes with an assertion that the feast of Purim was an annual celebration in his time:

Mordecai also wrote to the Jews that lived in the kingdom of Artaxerxes to observe these days, and to celebrate them as festivals, and to deliver them down to posterity, that it might never be buried in oblivion.... to observe those days, and give thanks to God on them; for which cause the Jews still keep the forementioned days, and call them the days of Phruim.

(Josephus 1998:365)

Thus, the story of Esther was particularly significant to Judaism in the first century, as it was commemorated through the feast of Purim, which included the recitation of the story of Esther. Therefore, Esther's fasting for divine protection may be considered a significant influence on Jewish attitudes toward fasting in the first century.

The book of Esther contains several accounts of fasting, the most prominent of which is the fast of Esther and her handmaidens for three days before Esther's unbidden

³⁰ See Ezra 8:21.

audience with Artaxerxes (Es 4:16-17). Prior to this fast, and contributing to it, was a fast of greater scale and magnitude, including many Jews:

When Mordecai learned all that had been done, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the midst of the city and wailed loudly and bitterly. He went as far as the king's gate, for no one was to enter the king's gate clothed in sackcloth. In each and every province where the command and decree of the king came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping and wailing; and many lay on sackcloth and ashes.

(Esther 4:1-3)

Esther's fast within the palace was not a unique event, but rather constituted participation in the larger context of fasting brought about by the king's decree. What was unique about Esther's fast was the action she presumed to undertake at the conclusion of it – to enter unbidden into the presence of the king, which carried a death sentence (Es 4:11). Thus, while the Jews were fasting as part of a larger scheme of mourning their impending death, Esther was fasting (as Ezra fasted) for the protection of YHWH in the undertaking of a divinely sanctioned mission, having been persuaded by Mordecai of the providence of YHWH in her royal status (Es 4:13-14). As in the case of Ezra, Esther's prayer and fasting is honored by YHWH; she gains an audience with the king, and in time Haman's plot is uncovered, Haman is hanged, and the Jews are saved. These themes would continue to be important to Jews in the first century, who also lived in exile and in danger of genocide.

Judaism has always been a religion and culture which emphasizes the uniqueness of the Jews and their God. The Jews are the chosen people of the one true God, and have been delivered from other nations miraculously in the Exodus from Egypt³¹. They were guided through the wilderness by the smoke and fire of YHWH³², and were fed manna from heaven³³. They received the promised land from its inhabitants through the hand of

³¹ Exodus 13-14.

³² Exodus 13:18-22.

³³ Exodus 16:23-24.

God in several miraculous events recorded in the Old Testament³⁴. Thus, Judaism has always placed an emphasis on the Jewish people as a dyad. This is significant for a social-scientific interpretation of fasting in both the Old Testament and New Testament. In the book of Esther, fasting is presented as a paradigm for understanding the differences – social, cultural, and religious – between the Jews and the Persians. Beal writes:

Jewish identity is not entirely self-evident or secure, but is established and defined within political discourse (in this case, by Haman's projection) Indeed, the text gives no indication of what kind of behavior would identify one as Jewish. What action? What appearance? What words? After all, Esther herself was able to conceal her identity with the Jews simply by not intentionally disclosing it, and Haman only knew of Mordecai's Jewish identity because Mordecai *had* disclosed it.

(Beal 1997:103)

In the book of Esther, the Jews are juxtaposed against the Persians through the lens of fasting. Esther fasts, for example, while Haman feasts³⁵. The Jews put on sackcloth and ashes as Haman parades himself in fine robes. As Oren notes:

The Jews' sackcloth and fasting contrast with the fine linen and feasting at the king's parties, and are presented as symbols of the "other," the excluded culture that is doomed to die.

(Oren 2009:153)

As Oren notes, fasting was not unique to the Jews of this time, but was a customary symbol of mourning in the ancient near east (Oren 2009:152-153). The contrast, however, between the Jews and the Persians in these texts is striking. The Persians were powerful, the Jews weak; the Jews' destruction is plotted by a Persian man, but the plot is overturned by a Jewish woman. In the end, Mordecai receives the honor Haman desired, while Haman is hanged on his own gallows. Esther is truly a book of contrasts. Oren observes:

The body continues to be central in reading cultural distinctions between Jews, the minority culture and Persians. The repressed, fasting Jewish body represents the

³⁴ For example, the fall of Jericho in Joshua 6, and the sun standing still in Joshua 10:13.

³⁵ Esther 3:15.

voice of the doomed “other.” Yet, repression is never complete. Indeed the sociopolitical order is successfully subverted when gender and culture come together. Esther, a skilled “other,” destabilizes and challenges the dominant social order and changes the political map. A Jewess, sentenced to death by Persian law, she reshapes the very concept of what it is to be a Persian.

(Oren 2009:142)

It is of interest to note that in Esther, both fasting and feasting are social functions, representative of the Jewish and Persian cultures, respectively. Fasting and feasting in Esther *define* the Jews and the Persians. Fasting and feasting represent these cultures’ respective worldviews:

The Jews’ fast in every province parallels the participation of the nobles and governors “of the provinces” in Ahashverosh’s first banquet. Instead of the celebratory culture of banqueting, the Jews’ signs of community mourning are a language of fear, the expression of a culture on the threshold of death. If eating and drinking make the body expand, fasting, arguably, causes it to contract, by cleansing and detoxifying it. In anticipation of death, the fasting body’s boundaries are pulled inwards. The common thread between feast and fast is that they are social in character, embracing “all” their participants. In each of the feasts and fasts there is a gathering of people of a certain identity. Although fasting as an act of expressing grief is not uniquely Jewish, in Esther it is mentioned as a Jewish behavior (4:3,16; 9:31), marking the Jews as a minority, excluded from the collective drinking and thus the collective identity of the Persians.

(Oren 2009:153³⁶)

Fasting signals the Jews’ collective identity as the “other” in a society where the intoxicated body is the norm (Oren 2009:154).

The passage from exclusion to full inclusion of the Jews in the social reality of the Persian Empire is represented dramatically through the move from Persian intoxicated bodies to Jewish fasting bodies to Jewish intoxicated bodies.

(Oren 2009:154)

Thus, several paradigms of fasting are operative in the Esther narrative. Fasting is presented as a sign of mourning and grief (Es 4:1-3), as an accessory to prayer, adding moral weight and earnestness (Es 4:16), and, in the larger context, as an identifying characteristic of the Jewish dyad in juxtaposition to the Persians’ decadence and

³⁶ Oren also notes: ‘the communal bonding of the fast effectively unites the Jews as a group, performing the same function as feasting for their Persian counterparts’ (Oren 2009:153).

indulgence. Oren notes the representation of the dyad in the text: 'Fasting signals the Jews' collective identity as the "other" in a society where the intoxicated body is the norm' (2009:154).

The relationship of fasting to Jewish identity in contrast to the dominant culture of an oppressor cannot be overlooked when examining social aspects of fasting in the New Testament. It is not difficult to find parallels between Persia in Esther's time, and Rome in the time of the Gospels. In each case, the Jews struggle to maintain their 'otherness' in spite of subservience to another nation. In the time of the Gospels, as has been noted above, the Jews placed emphasis on the unique, defining characteristics of the Jewish nation and the Jewish religion, forming parties, such as the Pharisees and Sadducees, and communities such as the Essenes, to maintain their dyads. The story of Esther figured prominently in the culture of first-century Judaism, as noted in Josephus, above, and fasting in Esther is presented as a distinguishing mark of Judaism. Thus it may be found that fasting in the Gospels represents a facet of Jewish identity in opposition to the 'Roman-ness' of the culture. This will be explored in further detail in Chapter 4.

3.2.10 Fasting in Psalm 35, 69 and 109

Fasting is mentioned in several of the Psalms, though none provides a unique or distinctive view of fasting that is not present elsewhere in the Old Testament. In Psalm 35:13-14, David links fasting with 'humbling the soul', which corresponds to the verbiage used in conjunction with fasting on the Day of Atonement (Lv 16:29-32). Fasting in this psalm is mentioned in the context of prayer, mourning, and deep sorrow. Psalm 68 presents fasting in connection with weeping, and suffering the reproach of enemies (Ps 69:10-11). In Psalm 109, the psalmist asks for YHWH's loving-kindness on the basis that his fasting has left him weak and frail, and brought the contempt of his enemies (Ps 109:21-26).

These instances of fasting, representative of the psalms, present a picture of personal, rather than corporate, fasting. In each instance, fasting seems to be an act of mourning or lending moral gravity to the psalmist's prayers, and is greeted with scorn by his

enemies. Placing fasting into the context of the social realia discussed in Chapter 2, fasting in the Psalms seems to bring shame on the psalmist, though the psalmist expects that fasting will ultimately result in honor for YHWH and for the psalmist. For example, Psalm 109:24-27:

My knees are weak from fasting,
And my flesh has grown lean, without fatness.
I also have become a reproach to them;
When they see me, they wag their head.
Help me, O LORD my God;
Save me according to Your loving-kindness.
And let them know that this is Your hand;
You, LORD, have done it.

3.2.11 Isaiah 58:3-10

'Why have we fasted and You do not see?
Why have we humbled ourselves and You do not notice?'
Behold, on the day of your fast you find *your* desire,
And drive hard all your workers.
"Behold, you fast for contention and strife and to strike with a wicked fist.
You do not fast like *you do* today to make your voice heard on high.
"Is it a fast like this which I choose, a day for a man to humble himself?
Is it for bowing one's head like a reed
and for spreading out sackcloth and ashes as a bed?
Will you call this a fast, even an acceptable day to the LORD?'

(Isaiah 58:3-5)

In Isaiah 58 the people bring a charge against YHWH – they have fasted, and he has not recognized it – 'why have we fasted, and you do not see? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you do not notice?' (58:3). The assumption present here is that fasting is an act which carries inherent religious power – the power to coerce YHWH into a response. Human fasting makes necessary a divine response. Having fasted and received no response, a challenge to the justice of YHWH is issued – it is implied that God has not given the due reward for the peoples' asceticism. As Motyer points out, this reveals a religious mindset more akin to Canaanite religion than to the worship of YHWH:

... the religion which is exposed here rests on Canaanite rather than Yahwistic principles. The essence of Canaanite religion was to put the gods under pressure to perform their functions (hence, for example what we would call orgiastic rites

designed to stimulate Baal to acts of fertility). This is the spirit which verse 3 reveals...the motive is to pressure the Lord into a response, and hence the dismay that so much afflictive piety has attracted no divine attention!...Theologically and practically, chapter 58 belongs with 1:10-20. The two passages are the same in content, emphasis and movement. In both, it is the unholy alliance between religious punctiliousness and personal shortcoming that is condemned and, in particular, the assumption that it is possible to be truly religious and socially indifferent.

(Motyer1993:478)

Motyer summarizes Isaiah's general thrust on fasting:

Fasting which is a calculated prompt directed at the Lord, a day of self-pleasing to the disadvantage of others and provocative of the worst elements in the human spirit brings no spiritual result because it does not go beyond the formal act; it has no currency in heaven.

(Motyer1993:480)

3.2.12 Zechariah 7 and 8

Then the word of the LORD of hosts came to me, saying, "Say to all the people of the land and to the priests, 'When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months these seventy years, was it actually for Me that you fasted? `When you eat and drink, do you not eat for yourselves and do you not drink for yourselves? `Are not these the words which the LORD proclaimed by the former prophets, when Jerusalem was inhabited and prosperous along with its cities around it, and the Negev and the foothills were inhabited?'"

(Zechariah 7:4-7)

Zechariah's diatribe in chapters 7 and 8 of his prophecy gives a clear look at the demise of religious fasting among Jews in exile in Babylon. In this text, a deputation from Bethel has come to ask Zechariah about the need to continue observing the fasts of the fifth and seventh months (vs. 2-3). The implication of their question is that the Jews have grown weary of observing these fasts and times of national mourning, and question the legitimacy of continuing these fasts. Baron describes the context of their question:

To understand the circumstances which brought about the very significant incident recorded in these verses, we have to remember that the fourth year of Darius was a time when things seemed to go well, and looked promising to the remnant who had returned to the land. Every hindrance to the completion of the building of the Temple had been removed by the royal decree of Darius, as recorded in Ezra vi. Even the city of Jerusalem, in spite of the desolations which still prevailed in some of its

quarters, and the ruinous condition of its walls, was beginning to improve and revive, and contained already some fine private residences, as we may judge from Ha. i. 4. The question, therefore, naturally agitated the minds of the people whether, with these signs of apparent prosperity the restored remnant should continue to observe the days of national sorrow and fasting which had been instituted in the commemoration of the destruction of the Temple, and the desolation of the land at the commencement of the seventy years' captivity.

(Baron 1972:209-210)

Thus, the Jews, seeing improvement in their external situation, and apparently not discerning any particular benefit to be found in observing these fasts, question Zechariah whether these fasts should be continued.

Through Zechariah, YHWH challenges the Jews on the intent of their fasting in exile. Fasting in the fifth and seventh months may have been a reference to commemorating the destruction of the temple and to the murder of Gedaliah (Jer. 41:1) in the seventh month of 581 BCE. Eugene Merrill writes:

The death of Gedaliah was an extremely traumatic event for the community already crushed nearly to annihilation by the loss of the Temple, the ruin of the Holy City, and the deportation of most of its leadership. The wrath of Babylonia that must have followed this subordination to its sovereignty would in itself give cause for the remnant to lament its further suffering. For nearly 70 years these twin events of such sad recollection – the ruin of the Temple and violent death of the first exilic leader – had been commemorated.

(Merrill 1994:210)

Thus, it appears that fasting at this point in Jewish history had taken on the status of a bi-annual observance of mourning the loss of the temple, the Babylonian captivity, and the death of Gedaliah. Fasting here is clearly associated with grieving and mourning the fate of Israel in captivity. Zechariah's question indicates that fasting had become, by this point, a ritual devoid of religious devotion. Merrill states 'the form that YHWH's question takes in regard to the genuineness of the fasting and grief betrays in itself their lack of sincerity' (Merrill 1994:210). John Calvin, commenting on this text, paraphrases Zechariah's thoughts for his readers: 'God regards not fastings, except they proceed from a sincere feeling and tend to a right and lawful end' (Calvin 1986:172-173).

The clear implication of YHWH's rhetorical question is that the Jews fasted, just as they ate and drank, 'unto themselves' – that is, without consideration of God. 'Their religious activity was self-centered and self-fulfilling. It failed to satisfy the demands of a holy and loving God' (Merrill 1994:210). Calvin expands on this theme – Zechariah's audience seemed to view fasting as the mere fulfillment of a religious obligation, and did so without consideration of the attitude necessary to honor YHWH:

It was then the object of the Prophet to awaken the Jews, that they might not imagine that God was pacified by fasting or by any other frigid ceremonies, but that they might know that something more was required. And we see how prone mankind are to rely on external rites, and to think that they have rightly performed their duty to God when they have fasted. As then human nature labours under this disease, the Prophet is here sent to dissipate this delusion; which he does by declaring that fasting does not please God, or is acceptable to him, as though it were something meritorious, or as though there was in it any holiness.

(Calvin1986:173)

Calvin further elaborates on the reference to eating and drinking 'to themselves.' His interpretation is that the Jews to whom Zechariah speaks had come to see the basic aspects of living – eating, drinking, abstaining from food and drink, as unrelated to the worship of God. Because eating and drinking were done without consideration for God, fasting was approached with the same attitude, and was thus not honoring to God:

By saying, that to themselves they did *eat* and *drink*, he intimates that to eat and to drink, or to abstain from eating and drinking, are things wholly unconnected with the worship of God. Another sense may indeed be elicited, – that the Jews did eat as the heathens did: and there will be in this case an indirect reproof, – that they sought to pacify God only once or twice in the year, and that during the rest of the time they were heedless and indulged themselves in excesses.... When, therefore, the Jew feasted themselves without any regard to God, it is no wonder that their fastings were rejected; for their course was not consistent.

(Calvin 1986:174, emphasis in the original)

Barker elaborates on the concept of fasting unto themselves, without repentance or worship:

Making an effective use of rhetorical questions, the Lord cast doubt on the people's sincerity when they previously had observed the fasts. They had turned a time that should have convicted them of their past and present sins into a rote ritual devoid of its divinely intended purpose – e.g., prayer and repentance. They had turned it into a

time of self-pity for their physical condition, devoid of genuine repentance and moral implications.

(Barker 1985:644)

The solution, according to Zechariah, was to be found in the redemption of God, who would gather his people from captivity and return them to Jerusalem (Zch 8:1-17). This return to the holy city would result in a revival among the Jews, and a restoration of the honor of the Jewish people (Zch 8:20-23). In this context, fasting and grieving would be replaced with joyous feasting:

Then the word of the LORD of hosts came to me, saying, "Thus says the LORD of hosts, 'The fast of the fourth, the fast of the fifth, the fast of the seventh and the fast of the tenth *months* will become joy, gladness, and cheerful feasts for the house of Judah; so love truth and peace.'

(Zechariah 8:18-19)

In this text, Zechariah mentioned four annual fasts. Two, in the fifth and seventh months, had been the subject of inquiry in the original question in Zechariah 7:5. In response, YHWH mentions also the fasts of the fourth and tenth months. The fast of the fourth month commemorated the breach of the wall of Jerusalem in the fourth month of 586 BCE (Jer. 39:2), and the fast of the tenth month remembered the siege of Jerusalem which began on the tenth day of the fourth month in 588 BCE. (2 Ki. 25:25, Jr. 41:1-2; Merrill 1994:231).³⁷

At least four times a year the survivors of those disasters and their descendants remembered the events and mourned with fasting and other observances. Not until the return under Cyrus, the initial attempts at rebuilding, and the laying of the foundations of the temple under Joshua and Zerubbabel was their hope even partially realized that the tragedies might be undone.

(Merrill 1994:231)

Thus fasting is depicted as a symbol of mourning and grieving for the lost honor of Israel. The Jews of Zechariah's time, however, fasted without deliberate piety and deference to YHWH, but merely as an external religious act. In light of reduced suffering and their acclimation to the exile, they questioned the need to continue observing these

³⁷ See also Parker and Dubberstein (1956:28).

fasts at all. Zechariah's response is that God will return his people to Jerusalem, thus restoring their honor, and then mechanical religious fasting will be replaced with authentic feasting and celebration.

3.2.13 Summary of fasting in the Old Testament

From the representative texts surveyed in this Chapter, several themes emerge regarding fasting in the Old Testament. These will be summarized below, and presented in Table 1, below.

First, fasting in the Old Testament is both a corporate and a person discipline. There is textual evidence that fasting was practiced by individuals, by cohesive groups, such as soldiers and women, by towns, and by the nation of Israel as a whole. National fasting was at times in response to the direct command of YHWH, as in the Day of Atonement, and at other times, in response to a specific crisis or in memorial of a national tragedy, such as the events leading to the exile. Individuals fasted in sorrow and mourning, in preparation for receiving the Decalogue, in intercession for the forgiveness of the nation of Israel, for the salvation of the nation of Israel, and for the healing of individuals. Fasting was an accessory to prayer, adding moral urgency and gravity to one's prayers. Fasting was also, during the time of the exile, clearly connected to the honor of YHWH and of the Jewish nation, and became an identifying mark of the Jewish dyad during the time of Esther. Often, but not always, in the Old Testament, fasting is presented in connection with the resolution of a dilemma or a crisis. Table 3.1, below, presents the situations which produced instances of fasting, the significance of fasting in each instance, and the resolution, if one is present, in the texts considered in this Chapter.

Table 3.1: An Overview of Selected Fasting Texts in the Old Testament

Text	Situation	Significance	Resolution
Genesis 2,3	Abstinence from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is commanded.	Eve, then Adam, eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil after the serpent's temptation.	A future offspring of Eve will crush the serpent's head and restore the relationship between YHWH and humanity.

Leviticus 16	Fasting as 'humbling the soul' before the Day of Atonement.	Fasting is implied as an annual act of humility before the Day of Atonement.	Fasting is an aspect of preparation for the corporate forgiveness of Israel.
Deuteronomy 9	Moses fasts 40 days to receive the Law, then 40 days for the deliverance of the Jews from the wrath of YHWH.	Fasting was for intimacy with YHWH, leading to the giving of the law; the second fast was to expiate the wrath of YHWH for the peoples' idolatry.	Moses' fasts precipitate the giving of the Law and expiate the wrath of YHWH.
1 Samuel 31,	The people of Jabesh-Gilead fast for one week in commemoration of Saul's death.	Fasting was a formal, city-wide act of mourning.	No resolution is necessary in the text.
2 Samuel 1	David and his warriors fast for the remainder of the day upon learning of Saul's death.	Fasting was a visceral, emotional response, and was limited in scope.	No resolution is necessary in the text.
2 Samuel 16	David fasts and prays for the life of his child, born of adultery with Bathsheba.	Fasting is depicted as an accessory to David's intercession, and ended when the child died.	Fasting and prayer in this instance are not sufficient to abate the judgment of YHWH.
Ezra 8	Ezra and returning refugees fast for divine protection for their journey to Jerusalem	Fasting is a means of adding moral weight to prayers, and soliciting divine protection.	Ezra links fasting with the answer to the peoples' prayer. They fasted, and YHWH hears their prayer.
Psalms 35, 69, 109	Fasting is a personal response to sorrow, or an accessory to prayer	Fasting brings the reproach and shame of enemies	The psalmist expects YHWH to honor Himself and the psalmist through fasting.
Isaiah 58	People have fasted, but God has not seen or recognized it.	Fasting was seen as an act which placed obligation on God, and was done with a spirit of social indifference and oppression of the poor.	The fast YHWH has chosen is one which combines piety with social justice – fasting in humility before YHWH leads to justice and mercy for the poor.
Zechariah 7:4-7; 8:18-19	Two (or four) annual fasts commemorating various aspects of the fall of Jerusalem and	Jews ate, drank, and fasted "to themselves", rather than with deference to	YHWH will return his people to Jerusalem, restoring their honor, and fasting will turn to

	the temple. The need to continue these fasts is questioned.	YHWH.	feasting.
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It is significant to note that fasting in the Old Testament is devoid of an element common to fasting literature today, both Catholic and Evangelical: devotional fasting is not presented in the Old Testament. Old Testament fasting is not presented as an act of devotion, intended to create intimacy with YHWH, or to express devotion and faith. Fasting, in short, is not presented in the Old Testament as an act of personal piety, but of sorrow, repentance, moral urgency, or memorial. N.T. Wright notes:

Fasting in this period was not, for Jews, simply an ascetic discipline, part of the general practice of piety. It had to do with Israel's present condition: she was still in exile. More specifically, it had to do with commemorating the destruction of the Temple. Zechariah's promise that the fasts would turn into feasts could come true only when YHWH restored the fortunes of his people.

(Wright 1996:433-434)

Fasting in the Old Testament is usually a response to a crisis or a felt need, or in memory of a national crisis. Fasting in the Old Testament is most often occasional; that is, it is a response to a specific occasion. This occasion may be temporally present to the one(s) fasting, or it may be in the past, in which case fasting is practiced as a memorial of the event. Fasting may also be practiced, as in the case of the Day of Atonement, in response to a divine command. Fasting without a specific occasion, simply as an act of devotion or piety, is absent from the Old Testament, but is a fairly common theme in contemporary fasting literature.

The culture of the first-century Mediterranean world of the Gospels was a product of several cultural traditions, of which Judaism was the most significant. A social-scientific study of fasting in this context, however, would be incomplete without a critique of fasting in other cultures which contributed to the social and cultural milieu of the Gospels. To that end, a brief review of fasting in Mesopotamian, Greek, and Roman cultures follows.

3.3 AN OVERVIEW OF FASTING IN THE MESOPOTAMIAN WORLD

Very little material is found regarding fasting in the Mesopotamian world. It is significant that the Epic of Gilgamesh relates Enkidu's introduction into human society to a change in diet:

The milk of the wild animals he was used to suck.
Bread they placed before him; he felt embarrassed and looked and stared.
Nothing did Enkidu know of eating bread
And of drinking strong drink.
He had not been taught.
The priestess said to Enkidu "eat the bread, Enkidu
It is the staff of life.
Drink the strong drink, it is the custom of the land."
Enkidu ate the bread until he was sated.
Of the strong drink he drank seven goblets.
His soul felt free and happy.
His heart rejoiced,
And his face shone.
He rubbed his hairy body with oil,
And he became a human being.

(Heidel 1946:28)

The Epic may be said to present an existential moment for Enkidu; he becomes human when he eats the food of civilized society, identified by bread and wine. While this is not an instance of fasting, it is evidence that in Mesopotamian culture, food is clearly connected to one's dyad. As in the case of Esther, one's dyad is identified, in part at least, by one's diet. Inclusion in the dyad is a result of sharing the diet, in accordance with the dyad's customs. The Mesopotamians, like the Jews of the Old Testament, were an agrarian society, whose self-identity was connected to their sustenance.

Kozuh notes that meat, in Mesopotamian culture, would most likely have been stewed mutton:

Mutton was (and is) fare unto itself. While its tough texture does not lend itself to roasting, the stewing required to tenderize the meat brought out a rich flavor and broadened the utility of the meat. Thus the difference between lamb and mutton (or goat) was not that between good and bad meat. Instead, mutton stood for economization, while lamb represented a type of conspicuous consumption. Indeed, it is probably in mutton that we find meat as it would have been known to most Mesopotamians.

(Kozuh 2010:544-545)

3.4 AN OVERVIEW OF FASTING IN THE HELLENIC WORLD

Fasting in Greek culture served two purposes. Stoic philosophers practiced fasting as a means toward the development of moderation and self-control. As Feiss notes:

Fasting, too, was widely upheld, although for different reasons. Fasting among dedicated Pagan philosophers was inspired by a notion of moderation and self-mastery that did not include the Jewish (and Christian) motivations of penitence and insistent prayer.

(Feiss 2011:1)

Though fasting to develop personal moderation and self-control was not present in Old Testament instances of fasting, this theme would later emerge in Christian theology in the writings of Thomas Aquinas, who connected Christian fasting to the development of the cardinal virtue of temperance (Murphy 2009:74).

In Greek religion, fasting was practiced in the worship of Demeter, the goddess of the harvest. Jager describes the public processional, and the role of fasting women in it:

In the traditional processions in honor of Demeter, special care was taken to emphasize the goddess' role as a concerned mother. This part of the myth was represented by women who prepared themselves for their role by a prolonged period of fasting, during which they also abstained from bathing, combing, and dressing. They thus sought to represent the appearance and the state of mind of a frantic mother in a desperate search for her lost child. Their parched and emaciated appearance also was meant to evoke the neglected and barren appearance of the fields and orchards during the period of absence of the goddess. We notice here again the general rule that in a cosmos, the primary absence is the absence of a person and not the lack of things, objects, or substances.

(Jager 1999)

Thus fasting was practiced in Greek culture, as with perhaps all ancient Mediterranean cultures, but the theological and philosophical significance of fasting differs from that found in the Old Testament.

It is significant to note that in the instance of the fasting women in the procession of Demeter, fasting was a symbol of anticipation of the return of the missing goddess. A parallel may be seen in the New Testament figure of Anna, who is presented in Luke

2:36-38 as a widow who continually fasted and prayed at the Temple in Jerusalem. Upon seeing Simeon's blessing of the baby Jesus as the Christ, she gave thanks to God and spoke of Jesus to 'all those who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem' (Lk 2:38). Thus, Anna is presented as fasting in anticipation of the arrival of the Messiah in a manner similar to the fasting women in the procession of Demeter. This will be explored in greater detail in Section 4.2.2 of the present study.

3.5 AN OVERVIEW OF FASTING IN ROMAN CULTURE

The role of fasting in pre-Christian Roman culture was quite limited, and when employed for religious purposes, seems to have applied primarily to various sects of goddess worship. For the Romans, much like the Persians described in the biblical book of Esther, feasting, rather than fasting, was characteristic of their religious observances.

Abstention from sex before religious rituals was common in Roman religion, but fasting from food varied by region and tradition. There was no standard Roman fasting practice. For example:

- At Oropus, a person seeking guidance from an oracle was required to fast from food for one day, and from wine for three days.
- The Bacchic mysteries at Rome prior to 168 BCE required an initiate to abstain from sex for 10 days, and, it seems, to fast as well, breaking the fast on the tenth day.
- A Roman festival of Ceres, in imitation of the Greek Demeter rite, required a nine-day fast from bread and wine by female initiates (Finn 2009:16-17).

That said, Grimm notes that it is not clear that food is what was abstained from during the fast of Demeter, as the fast was forbidden to spectators, and the fast may have been a fast from all food, or simply from 'the gifts of Demeter' (Grimm 2005:38). Grimm also notes that most attributions of fasting to these mystery cults consists of conjecture by the cults' detractors, as the rituals of these religions were closely guarded secrets, and thus may not be historically reliable (Grimm 2005:39).

Fasting in honor of Ceres/Demeter was at one point legislated by the Roman senate, but it is not clear the extent to which the Roman populace observed the fast: 'In 191 BC, in response to portents, the Senate further decreed a day's fast to take place in October once every five years in honor of the goddess, but which appears to have been celebrated annually by the reign of Augustus' (Finn 2009:17).

Ritual abstinence from food and sex in Roman religion arise from the significance of the goddess as a representative of the fertility of women, and the metaphor of a woman as a fertile field (Finn 2009:17). Where fasting is found in Roman religious practice, it is typically in observation of goddess worship. Robert Turcan has described some cultic Roman fasts in terms of Christian penitential Lenten fasting, but such a description is not warranted (Turcan 1996:44).

Grimm notes that where fasting is present in Roman religious practice, it is in the mystery religions, rather than the official cults, that it is practiced.

If austerities, fasts, and other self-mortifying practices had no place in state or city cults, they have often been attributed to mystery cults: the religions of Isis, Magna Mater, Cybele and Mithras.... Self-mortifications and fasting, when they were present, were in all likelihood associated with the commemoration of the suffering of the god and with mourning for his death, while the usual sacrifice and feasting celebrated his resurrection.

(Grimm 2005:39)

Despite the presence of fasting as a symbol in the mystery religions, 'fasting had no part in the preparation of priests for sacrifice or for other liturgical functions in Latin and Greek city cults, and neither were the priests and priestesses of the Imperial cult obliged to go without food' (Grimm 1996:41).

An exception to fasting as goddess worship may be found in various Roman funeral rites, which were similar in many ways to other ancient funeral rites: 'Fasting as a sign and accompaniment of mourning for the dead was probably as common among pagans as we have seen that it was among the Jews' (Grimm 2005:38).

In contrast to fasting, feasting was characteristic of pagan religious life in Rome:

It seems fair to conclude that eating and drinking were central to pagan religious life, whether in grand public celebrations given by a triumphator or an emperor, or more modest festivities of a club or a family holiday. Food was a part of the religious ceremony, whether the officiants and their rich guests tasted the meat and the wine while the onlookers got only some small token, or the whole people got satiated and drunk.

(Grimm 2005:37)

Grimm notes the similarity between Greek and Roman religion in terms of fasting:

‘Despite the often repeated claim that fasting is a universal religious practice, neither Greek nor Roman religious life made much use of it’ (Grimm 2005:37).

On the whole, fasting was not a prominent aspect of Roman religion. Fasting was not practiced in official state religions, and for the mystery religions that practiced fasting, the significance of fasting was fluid, kept a close secret, and has been transmitted historically by detractors, rather than proponents, of these rites. Feasting was prominent in Roman cultic rites, as well as abstention from sex for religious purposes, but references to fasting are sporadic and subject to interpretation. Grimm summarizes the role of fasting in Greek and Roman religion thus: ‘habitual fasting was seldom required of the devotees of the gods... In general, however, total fasting did not play any significant part in Graeco-Roman religion’ (Grimm 2005:40).

3.6 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This Chapter has presented an overview of fasting in the ancient world. It has noted that fasting was a nearly universal religious phenomenon in the ancient Mediterranean world, and has explored the connection between food and fasting and the greater whole of Mediterranean societies. A relatively detailed, though not comprehensive, study of fasting in the Old Testament has been presented, and a summary picture of Old Testament fasting has been articulated. Further, several areas of significance relating fasting in the Old Testament to the New Testament have been expressed, in anticipation of the next Chapter. An overview of fasting in ancient Mesopotamian, Greek and Roman cultures has provided a few parallels between these cultures and that of the

Jews in the Old Testament, which contribute to the cultural and social world of the Gospels.

The following Chapter will form the main thrust of the present study. Chapter 4 will provide a comprehensive study of fasting in the New Testament. An attempt will be made to provide a social-scientific interpretation of New Testament fasting texts, in light of certain social realia (discussed in Chapter 2), and of the Old Testament fasting tradition, discussed in this Chapter, which would significantly influence Jewish fasting in the time of the gospels.

Chapter 4

Fasting in the New Testament

4.1 INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

In this Chapter the present study reaches its first stated purpose, namely to examine fasting in the New Testament in its social and cultural contexts. To that end, texts about fasting in the gospels and Acts will be critically evaluated with an eye toward determining their contributions toward a holistic, contextual New Testament theology of fasting, which will be articulated in Chapter 5 of the present study. First, a social-scientific view of fasting in the first-century Mediterranean world will be discussed, followed by an attempt to place Jesus into the context of the Judaism of his time. This will provide an informed vantage point from which to view Jesus' fasting and responses to the fasting of others in the gospels. Second, a critical exegesis will be applied to New Testament fasting texts. This exegesis will begin with a section on lexical semantics – specifically the vocabulary used to discuss fasting in the New Testament. Following this, specific New Testament texts will be discussed. Unlike Chapter 3, which provided a representative view of fasting in the Old Testament, the present Chapter will attempt a comprehensive view of fasting in the New Testament.

4.1.1 A social-scientific view of fasting in the first-century Mediterranean world

The primary goal of this Chapter is to interpret instances of fasting in the New Testament, and the gospels in particular, in their theological, social, and cultural contexts. To that end, it will be useful to begin with a treatment of the social and cultural meaning of fasting in the first-century Mediterranean world. Theological interpretations of fasting will be drawn from exegesis of the texts under scrutiny, but the broad themes of fasting in the social and cultural context of the New Testament will be sketched here.

Malina and Rohrbaugh place fasting into the context of the honor-shame society which forms the backdrop for the New Testament, articulating that fasting may take two forms: *ritualized* and *nonritualized*. In the previous Chapter ritualized fasting in the Old Testament was referred to as 'formal' fasting, while nonritualized fasting was described

in terms such as 'visceral', 'spontaneous', and 'emotional'. Malina and Rohrbaugh explain the social dynamics of nonritualized fasting:

Fasting is a highly compressed piece of social behavior that can be either ritualized or nonritualized. It occurs in nonritualized form when persons are afflicted with overwhelming evil. The usual response to such evil is 'mourning': the inability to eat, sleep, worry about one's looks, worry about the state of one's clothing, etc... The proper social response to fasting and the mourning within which it is embedded is assistance on the part of the persons who are not mourning and need not fast.

(Malina & Rohrbaugh 2003:360)

Nonritualized fasting, then, for Malina and Rohrbaugh, is social communication, intended to convey grief, suffering, and loss. It is an intentional display of shame in order to illicit the assistance of another, who may be a community member or God. Nonritualized fasting should then be seen as a radical act in an honor/shame society – intentionally losing honor and acquiring shame in the sight of others:

What one does when one fasts, then, is stand before one's peers or before God in abject self-humiliation (the Hebrew name for fasting rituals is *taanith*, that is, humiliation). In an honor-shame society, to present a fasting or mourning mien to the outside world means one is afflicted indeed. The normal reaction of peers in the face of such abject self-humiliation is to proffer assistance to the person who has so humiliated himself (and his family) in public. Fasting is thus a form of self-humiliation intended to get the attention of another so that the other will offer his/her assistance.

(Malina & Rohrbaugh 2003:360)

Where nonritualized fasting may be directed at the community or at God, ritual fasting, according to Malina and Rohrbaugh, is directed from the community to God. Ritualized fasting is an attempt (or begins as an attempt, which may in time become a mere formal exercise) to illicit the assistance of God in alleviating the suffering, or restoring the honor, of Israel:

Israelite custom also included the practice of ritualized mourning in the face of social disaster, largely political in character. This fasting is communication with God (see Isa 58:3-6; Jer 14:12; Joel 1:14; also 1 Kings 21:9.12; 2 Chron 20:3; Ezra 8:21; Est 4:16). This fasting is communication addressed to God. The reasoning behind such behavior is that if a fellow human being would give assistance when I (and my family) humiliate myself, then all the more so will God give assistance.

(Malina & Rohrbaugh 2003:360)

In the New Testament, one finds both ritualized fasting and nonritualized fasting. Indeed, in some texts, (i.e., Lk 18) the distinction between the two may not be immediately clear.

Several hermeneutical possibilities emerge regarding the practice of fasting in the New Testament world, which are relevant to social-scientific interpretation of fasting texts:

- Fasting can be an intentional dishonoring of oneself (and by extension, one's dyad) in a society which prizes honor above all else;
- Fasting may place a moral obligation on the observer of the fasting – when one dishonors himself by fasting, others are bound by honor to render assistance, particularly to members of their own family or dyad;
- Fasting may, alternatively, be used to acquire honor through demonstrating great devotion to God and to Israel. One who places piety and dyad above his or her own honor may thereby gain honor in the estimation of the community;
- Fasting may be personal, or may be undertaken on behalf of the nation of Israel;
- Fasting may be a deep, visceral response to personal or national suffering, or it may be a ritualized action which is devoid of personal or emotional import on the part of the one fasting: and
- Fasting in the gospels and Acts is influenced by fasting in the Jewish tradition, including the Old Testament and various extrabiblical Jewish traditions.

In an interpretation of texts about fasting in the New Testament, each of these factors (and possibly others) must be considered.

4.1.2 Jesus in the context of contemporary Judaism

Fasting in the New Testament revolves around the person of Jesus. Jesus is presented as fasting, as conspicuously not fasting, and as giving instruction regarding fasting. Key figures in his story are presented as fasting, such as Anna, and fasting figures into one or more of his parables. The apostles and early followers of Jesus in the book of Acts are presented as fasting. Therefore, before examining specific fasting texts, particularly in the gospels, it is relevant to place Jesus into the context of the Judaism of his time.

Cobus van Wyngaard, in an MDiv-dissertation at the University of Pretoria, presents a summary of Jesus in the context of contemporary Judaism in the thought of public theologian David J. Bosch. Van Wyngaard discusses Bosch's concept of *alternative community*, presenting the church as the alternative community within the Judaism from which it emerged. Four paradigms are presented for understanding the Judaism of Jesus' time, and it is clear that Jesus did not fit clearly within any of them, though there may be areas of similarity.

First, the Sadducees 'worked with a theology of the *status quo*, working within the politico-sociological framework, accepting the Roman rule. It was a form of political realism; they knew that the Roman rule could not be overthrown'(Van Wyngaard 2008:25). Jesus did not present a theology of the *status quo* – clearly he was seen as a radical in his time, but his interest was not in legitimizing or overthrowing Roman rule. Rather, because religion and politics were intermingled in the first-century Mediterranean world, Jesus' religious statements are often at the same time political statements (i.e., the 'kingdom of God'),

Next, van Wyngaard presents the Pharisees, who are presented in the gospels as adversaries of both the Sadducees and of Jesus. The Pharisees 'busied themselves with that which was purely religious, the classification of the whole of life into what was clean and what was unclean' (2008:25). Jesus does not fit neatly into the camp of the Pharisees, as many examples of challenge/riposte between Jesus and Pharisees in the gospels demonstrate, though Jesus and the Pharisees shared many concerns.

A third group within Judaism presented in the gospels, and indeed in Jesus' group of intimate followers, is the Zealots. There is debate as to whether the Zealots existed as a distinct, organized group at the time of Jesus (Bosch 1975:4), but as the Zealots are discussed in the gospels, it is necessary to examine their relationship with Jesus. Van Wyngaard states that the Zealots 'represented a theology of revolution, and identified the reign of God with institutional reform' (2008:25). He states that 'Jesus was closer to this group than to the other three, but still rejected it' (2008:25). Jesus' purpose was not

to overthrow the political *status quo* and usher in the physical kingdom of Israel, but to preach the kingdom of God.

Finally, the Essenes ‘withdrew from public life to live in a faithful community, waiting for the final judgment of God’ (Van Wyngaard 2008:26). Van Wyngaard compares the Essenes to a ‘theology of the ghetto, a theology of asceticism’ (2008:26). Jesus is not an Essene, but is actively involved in public life with both religious Jews (including the groups mentioned above) and with sinners.

Jesus does not fit into any one of these primary Jewish groups in his world. In fact, Van Wyngaard writes, ‘the alternative that Jesus provided was seen as a threat by all of the above groups’ (2008:26). Jesus in the gospels presents an alternative to the Judaism of his time. One can find areas of similarity between Jesus and each of these groups, of course, as they are all aspects of Judaism, and are not polar opposites. What is relevant to the current study is to note that the life and message of Jesus cannot be placed neatly into the context of the Judaism of his day. He was not a typical member of any Jewish group.

4.2 FASTING IN THE NEW TESTAMENT: CRITICAL EXEGESIS

4.2.1 Lexical semantics

This Section will discuss the Greek language used to discuss fasting in the gospels and Acts, as well as other words of significance in the New Testament narrative relative to abstinence.

In the context of the Day of Atonement, fasting is referred to indirectly with the injunction to ‘humble oneself’. In the Greek New Testament, the language is more direct, using verbiage that indicates simply not eating. Religious fasting is conveyed through the noun νηστεία (a fast, such as ‘the fast’ on the Day of Atonement) and the verb νηστεύω (I fast). The words are constructed through a simple conjunction of νε, the negative prefix, and εσθίω, to eat. In most texts, this word depicts voluntary abstinence from food for religious purposes. Textual examples of the noun form include Luke 2:37;

Acts 14:23, and some manuscripts include it in Matthew 17:21 and Mark 9:29. In 2 Corinthians 6:5 and 11:27 the word is used to depict involuntary abstinence due to difficult circumstances (Vine, Unger & White 1984:410). νῆστις, or 'one who has not eaten' (Bromiley 1985:632), is used to depict a lack of food in Mt 15:32 and Mk 8:3. ἄσιτος, the adjective meaning 'without food', is used in Ac 27:33 to depict fasting (Vine *et al.* 1984:411).

νηστεύω, the verb form, is used in many New Testament texts to depict the act of religious fasting³⁸. In context, it is clear that the fasting depicted is of an intentional, religious nature.

The language used for fasting in the New Testament is fairly uniform, leaving only one primary literary question, addressed in § 4.2.7, below. In Acts 9:9, Saul is depicted as not eating for three days following the appearance of the resurrected Christ, and Saul's subsequent blindness. νηστεία is not used in this text, though there has been some degree of deliberation as to whether Saul was engaging in a religious fast during this time, or whether he did not eat because of a sense of shock and foreboding following the appearance of Christ. This is discussed in further detail in § 4.2.7. With the exception of this text, the range of words used to depict fasting in the New Testament is quite narrow.

4.2.2 Anna's fasting in anticipation of the Messiah- Luke 2:36-38

And there was a prophetess, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years and had lived with *her* husband seven years after her marriage, and then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple, serving night and day with fastings and prayers. At that very moment she came up and *began* giving thanks to God, and continued to speak of Him to all those who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

(Luke 2:36-38)

³⁸ See Matthew 4:2, 6:16-18, 9:14-15; Mark 2:18-20; Luke 5:33-35, 18:12 and Acts 13:2-3.

This text provides an important cultural and theological aspect of Luke's introduction of Jesus as the Messiah: his presentation at the temple. Several important elements of the text are worthy of mention, but for the purpose of the present study focus will be directed to Anna, who is depicted as fasting in her dedication to God and to the temple. This Section will review Anna's person, her representation of the Judaism of her day, and the place that fasting played in her spirituality.

4.2.2.1 Introduction to Anna

Who was Anna, and what is her relevance in the Lukan narrative? More specifically, how is she relevant to Luke's goal of establishing the Messianic identity of Jesus, and what role might fasting have played? What, if anything, does Anna's fasting tell the reader of Luke's narrative about Jesus as the Messiah? These are the questions under consideration.

The text is straightforward in some respects: Anna was of the tribe of Asher, was an aged widow, and was devoted to the worship of God in the temple through fasting and prayer. She recognized (presumably through divine revelation) the Messianic identity of Jesus as his parents brought him to the temple, and she publicly associated his arrival with the redemption of Jerusalem. Thurston summarizes Anna's functions, as presented in Luke's narrative:

Verses 36-38 suggest at least five duties that Anna may have performed. She was (1) a prophetess (*prophētis*), (2) a widow (*chēra*), (3) engaged in fasting and prayer (*vēsteiais kai deēsesin*), (4) engaged in worship (*latreuosa*), and (5) in Luke's view she seems to be one of the first Christian evangelists, thus forming a great Lukan inclusion with Mary Magdalene at the end of the Gospel.

(Thurston 2001:50)

Jewish readers of Luke's text might pick up on several significant clues to her relevance, including her dyad and her age. Anna is from a historically significant tribe, the tribe of Asher, and is reminiscent of the seven prophetesses of ancient Israel (Sarah, Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Abigail, Huldah and Esther) 'who were functionally indistinguishable from their male counterparts' (Thurston 2001:50). In Luke's text,

Anna's male counterpart is Simeon, who is presented in Luke 2:25-35 as blessing both Jesus and his parents, and is followed in the text immediately by Luke's mention of Anna. Luke 2:38 indicates that 'at that very moment', that is, the moment when Simeon is blessing Joseph and Mary, Anna appears on the scene and begins to give thanks to God for the redemption of Jerusalem, which has clear Messianic implications.

Thurston asserts that Simeon and Anna present a typological comparison with Eli and Hannah in 1 Samuel 2:22, including Hannah's prayer and fasting:

There Eli and Hannah appear, here, Simeon and Anna. As Eli waited upon God at Shiloh, Simeon does likewise at the Temple. Although 1 Sam 2:22 gives a negative account of them, there were women serving at the entrance to the shrine at Shiloh. In contrast, the LXX and Aramaic targumim on Exodus speak well of the "women who ministered at the door of the tent of meeting," and report that they were fasting and praying. Thus, Anna at the Temple parallels the ministering women at Shiloh.

(Thurston 2001:48)

Anna's age may also give an indication of her connection with a prominent Jewish prophetess. Her age is unclear – it is not immediately evident if the text depicts Anna as having lived for eighty-four years, or for having lived eighty-four years after the death of her husband. If she lived eighty-four years after the death of her husband, her age may have been around 105, assuming she was married at around age 14, as was the custom. Elliott describes the significance of Anna's age:

Not only is the figure 'seven' significant for the number of her years of marriage but the figure 'eighty-four' is of especial significance, being a multiple of two symbolic numbers, seven and twelve, both of which are made use of in several Biblical narratives. If her total age of one hundred and five is accepted then this would doubtless have reminded Luke's readers of another Jewish prophetess who had an extended period of widowhood, namely Judith who in Jud 16:23 is said to have reached the age of one hundred and five (a multiple of seven). Just as Elizabeth in this infancy narrative is modeled on Hannah, so Anna is a type of Judith whose widowhood is in itself exemplary. Historical and literary associations as well as numerical symbolism thus favour the higher age for Anna.

(Elliot 1988:100)

Anna's exact age is not clear in the narrative, nor is it necessary for an understanding of her prophetic function and the role of fasting in it. Elliott summarizes the import of Anna's age:

A lady's age may be an indelicate subject for enquiry, but Luke wants us to know that his female counterpart to Simeon in the Temple was no ingénue but a centenarian προφήτις of stature and experience who invited comparison with Judith, a character famed for her thanksgiving, and for her nationalistic fervour.

(Elliott 1988:102)

Thus Anna is presented as an aged widow and a prophetess, a counterpart to Simeon, and a pious devotee of God and of the temple worship. Luke describes Anna in terms that would have cultural and theological significance to a Jewish audience, and that places Anna into a distinguished tradition of Jewish prophetesses. Let us now consider Anna's fasting.

4.2.2.2 Fasting in the Anna narrative

Anna is depicted as 'serving night and day with fastings and prayers' (Lk 2:37). From this verbiage, two aspects of fasting emerge. First, that fasting is associated with temple worship and service; and second, that fasting is associated with prayer. Anna's fasting is presented in exemplary terms. If Anna is indeed the counterpart to Simeon, then a parallel exists between Simeon's depiction as 'righteous and devout, looking for the consolation of Israel' (Lk 2:25), and Anna's service of prayer and fasting, and her interest in the 'redemption of Jerusalem'. Anna's fasting is thus presented in positive terms.

One may be tempted to dismiss the significance of Anna's fasting. Gilmour, for example, states that 'Anna's piety is described in terms of popular hyperbole' (Gilmour 1952:8:65). Such an explanation may lead the reader to wonder why Simeon is not portrayed as fasting, or Mary, for that matter, as Luke clearly intends to depict these people as pious, holy Jews. Thurston writes:

Intense fasting and prayer were the tradition of Israel in times of national crisis and were usual expressions of personal piety. The point is that Anna kept more than the

normal Monday and Thursday fasts. Furthermore, widows and prayer are often mentioned together in the New Testament, and the combination of prayer and fasting is seen, especially in Acts, as crucial to the spiritual work of the early Christian community, as for example, in Acts 13:1-3. Anna is an example of those, like the widow in the Lukan parable in 18:1-8, who cry out to God day and night.

(Thurston 2001:52; see also Reid 1996:92)

Thus, Anna's fasting is presented as a distinct characteristic of her spirituality which distinguishes her from other characters in Luke's narrative. What was the significance of her fasting? Luke is not clear, going no further than to associate fasting with prayer and with service at the temple, and to place fasting into the context of Jewish piety.

Several theories have surfaced which attempt to explain Anna's fasting. Mitchell ascribes Anna's fasting to her desire for the appearance of the Messiah:

In this instance fasting is looked on favorably. It is said to be one way of "serving" God... There is no indication that she was required to do this.... Perhaps she was so burdened that the Messiah come that she spontaneously devoted much of her time to "fastings and prayers."

(Mitchell1990:455)

There is some thought that Anna may have been part of an order of widows who served at the temple (Ellis 1980:84). There is insufficient evidence for this conclusion, '[h]owever, the language and its connotations do suggest that the reader is to glimpse in Anna the 'consecrated widows' of the church whose primary function was prayer and intercession' (Thurston 2001:52). Brown (1977) mentions Anna's fasting only in a footnote, and does not ascribe significance to it. Strickert (1995) discussed other aspects of Anna's life, but makes no mention of her fasting. Wimmer, in a key text titled *Fasting in the New Testament: A study in Biblical theology*, makes mention of Anna only to point out that Luke presents her in a positive light (Wimmer 1982:83), and does not see Anna's fasting as theologically significant. Strickert (1995) presents Anna as a foil to Mary and Simeon as a counterpart to Joseph, but Anna's fasting is not addressed.

Thurston places Anna into a greater fasting context:

Clearly, Anna is more than an old woman who has nothing better to do than loiter around the Temple. She personifies the long history of an expectant people, those who have looked for the fulfillment of God's promises. She is a prophetess, a widow and an early evangelist. Each of these roles refers in the New Testament to a person of note, and each had positive associations in early Christianity and in Luke's community. Additionally, Anna exercises the ministries of prayer, fasting and worship. One final consideration is whether, beyond the evidence of the text itself, there were any groups or movements in second Temple Judaism with which Anna might legitimately be associated or which had women in situations or positions like hers.

(Thurston 2001:52)

One group emerges as a possibility: the Therapeutae. Thurston describes the group thus:

The Therapeutae were a cloistered and ascetic Jewish group in the vicinity of Alexandria in Egypt. The group seems to have disappeared in the days of Caligula and the Jewish troubles in Egypt. Our primary knowledge of them comes from Philo's *De vita contemplativa*. Philo contrasts them with the Essenes and uses Dionysian imagery to describe them to his Hellenistic audience. For our purposes it is noteworthy that the Therapeutae admitted women to their society and extolled the virtue of a virgin life in extravagant terms. The Therapeutae occupied themselves with study of the law, the composition of hymns, and the reading of the prophets and other religious literature.

(Thurston 2001:52-53)

It is not likely that Anna was a member of the Therapeutae, given geographical constraints, but it is significant to note that within the broader scheme of Judaism, prayer, fasting, and celibacy were sometimes linked, and that this connection included women, and had a prophetic emphasis. Thus, while people like Anna may not have been common within Judaism, neither was she a complete anomaly.

4.2.2.3 A social-scientific interpretation

The primary social reality at play in this text is honor – Luke's description of Anna's acquired honor, her subsequent ascription of honor to Jesus. Anna is in a position of honor in her community for several reasons, including her advanced age, her dyad, her faithful marriage and subsequent chastity, her ministry of prayer and fasting at the temple, her association with Simeon, and her identity as a prophetess. Luke's detailed description of Anna is clearly intended to give his readers a means of measuring Anna's

honor. Anna has acquired honor, and in turn she ascribes honor to Jesus. Jesus is honored by her recognition of his identity, by her praise to God, and by her ascription of honor to Jesus by honoring him to those who were looking for the 'redemption of Jerusalem.'

In this context, fasting is not depicted as a means of gaining honor (indeed, Jesus expressly denounced fasting as a means of acquiring honor in Matthew 6:16-18; see § 4.2.3, below); rather, Anna is honored for her fasting, though her fasting was not performed for the purpose of gaining honor. Anna's fasting and prayer constituted a ministry to God at the temple, apparently with messianic or eschatological expectations. Fasting, in this text, is honorable, and is part of the honorable life of a prophetess.

4.2.2.4 Summary and conclusions

Having examined Anna and her fasting, several concepts emerge. These will be summarized below.

- Anna's fasting is depicted as an act of piety, and distinguishes her from others in the Lukan narrative;
- Anna's fasting is not a necessary aspect of her recognition of Jesus as the Messiah. Others in the text, such as Simeon, made similar attributions to Jesus, but are not depicted as fasting;
- Anna's fasting, as is common in the Jewish tradition, is associated with prayer and with worship in the temple; and
- Anna's fasting does not define her role in Luke's narrative, but combines with other elements of his description, such as her dyad and her age, to present a more complete picture of Anna and her role in attributing Messianic status to Jesus.
- Anna is honored by Luke, and ascribes honor to Jesus. Fasting was one element of the basis of her honor, though not the defining one. Anna is honored for fasting, just as she is honored for marital faithfulness, for prayer, and for her advanced age.

4.2.3 Jesus fasting in the wilderness- Matthew 4:1-11

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And after He had fasted forty days and forty nights, He then became hungry. And the tempter came and said to Him, "If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread." But He answered and said, "It is written, 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.'" Then the devil took Him into the holy city and had Him stand on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to Him, "If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you.'"; and "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone." Jesus said to him, "On the other hand, it is written, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.'" Again, the devil took Him to a very high mountain and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory; and he said to Him, "All these things I will give You, if You fall down and worship me." Then Jesus said to him, "Go, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'" Then the devil left Him; and behold, angels came and *began* to minister to Him.

(Matthew 4:1-11)

Perhaps the most significant fasting text in the New Testament is found in Matthew 4:1-11. It is certainly the longest text which addresses fasting directly, and the only recorded instance of Jesus fasting. This text has had a significant impact on Christian views of fasting. A parallel text is found in Luke 4:1-13. The account in Matthew will be examined in this study because it provides more detail. A brief comparison between these texts is provided below. In the Section that follows, the textual tradition of this text will be examined, as well as a brief hermeneutical tradition, and finally a social-scientific interpretation of the text itself will be attempted.

4.2.3.1 Textual tradition

Any interpretation of the account of Jesus' fasting in Matthew 4 must take into account the textual tradition surrounding this pericope. Many questions arise related to the historicity of Jesus' 40-day fast and subsequent temptation. Wimmer asserts that the oral and literary tradition must be taken into account – specifically with regard to its impact on later redactions of the text (Wimmer 1982:32).

Though the three synoptic gospels present broadly similar accounts of these events, there is sufficient variation between them to make it difficult to construct the historicity of Jesus' fasting in the wilderness. However, several points of commonality are evident, and allow the exegete to construct a scenario for interpretation.

- Jesus is led in/into the desert by the Spirit;
- he is tempted by the devil;
- he remains forty days;
- he does not eat during this period;
- afterward he is hungry;
- the devil commands him to turn 'these stones' (Mt) or 'this stone' (Lk) into bread 'if you are the Son of God';
- Jesus answers with LXX Dt 8:3, 'Man shall not live by bread alone' (Mt adds more; see Wimmer 1982:32-33)

4.2.3.2 Hermeneutical tradition

Wimmer did not exaggerate when he wrote 'the scene of Jesus fasting forty days in the desert made a great impression on the early church' (Wimmer 1982:31). This text has clearly proved more significant for the practice of fasting in the history of the church than another other New Testament text, and its influence is evident in the writings of the Church Fathers. Tertullian puzzled over the question of whether Christians should follow the example of Jesus and fast after baptism, deciding that although baptism is a time of rejoicing, Christians should fast, because fasting drives out temptation (Wimmer 1982:31). Irenaeus believed that Jesus fasted in order to demonstrate his true humanity, and to provide an opportunity for the devil to tempt him, where previously no such opportunity existed. Ambrose went so far as to say that Jesus prescribed forty days of fasting for all Christians. Ephraem, Hilary of Poitiers, Augustine, and Leo the Great all note the significance of Jesus' forty-day fast as an example to all believers (Wimmer 1982:31).

Hilary believed that at the time of Jesus' fasting and temptation, Satan did not know his true identity. In his view, Satan knew that Jesus was a prophet, and that he had been

uniquely set apart by God through participation in a forty day fast in the wilderness. He writes:

Apprehensive of that time therefore in tempting him whom he considered to be a man, he acted rashly.... it was fitting, because of his wickedness and evil deed, that he be defeated by that same humanity in whose death and misfortunes he gloried... His temptation indicates how sinister are the devil's attempts especially against those who have been sanctified, for he eagerly desires victory over the saints.

(Simonetti 2001:57)

Origen relates Jesus' forty day fast to his humanity, stating that forty days, consisting of four groups of ten, is 'akin to the four aspects of physical reality, because the sensible world is formed out of four elements' (Simonetti 2001:57). He taught that Jesus limited his fast to forty days so that no one would doubt his true humanity – that is, a longer fast might have been deemed beyond the limits of human endurance, and cast doubt on Jesus' hypostatic union. After his fast, according to Origen, Jesus was hungry in order to participate in our human condition through his suffering (Simonetti 2001:57).

An anonymous early commentator, in an *Incomplete Work on Matthew, Homily 5*, writes that Jesus' hunger, which the text indicates arose at the conclusion of his fast, was voluntary. That is, as the Son of God, Jesus had the power to supernaturally sustain the human body without nourishment, and to protect himself from the sensation of hunger. Jesus, at the conclusion of his fast, voluntarily took upon himself the state of hunger to lure Satan into tempting him: 'After the devil beheld him fasting for forty days, he gave up hope. It was when he realized that Christ was hungry that hope was restored (Simonetti 2001:58).' He explains Jesus' voluntary hunger thus:

To be hungry and not to eat is proper of human patience, but not to be hungry is proper of a divine nature. Therefore he who was not hungry for forty days and then became hungry demonstrates that his hunger was voluntary and not necessary.

(Simonetti 2001:58)

Peter Chrysologus explains that Jesus' fast precipitates the fast of Lent. He writes that '[t]he number forty and the number ten, which hold sacraments both in heaven and on earth because a square is not free to open, are used to explain the understanding of the Lord's fast' (Chrysologus, in Simonetti 2001:58). In this interpretation, it seems clear that Chrysologus is imposing his theology of Lenten fasting on to the fast of Jesus, as if the purpose of Jesus' fast was to institute the fast of Lent.

John Calvin sees Jesus' fast as a means of gaining divine authority, and rejects the attempt to imitate Jesus' forty day fast:

Christ did not fast to abstain from food and drink to give an example of temperance, but to gain Him more authority in being set apart from the common lot of men, that He might progress as an angel from heaven, not as a man of the earth. Let me ask you, what sort of virtue would there have been in abstinence, in not taking food, for one who would never have suffered pains of appetite from lack of food, if He had not been in the form of the flesh? So it is really quite foolish to institute the so-called forty-day (*Quadragesima*) fast an imitation of Christ. For there is no more reason today why we should follow the example of Christ, than ever there was for the holy Prophets and the other Fathers under the Law to imitate the fast of Moses. In fact we know that no-one ever had such a thought.

(Calvin 1972:134)

4.2.3.3 A social-scientific interpretation

Given the significance of this text for formulating early Christian views on fasting, and the context of this event very early in Jesus' ministry, it is proper to apply social-scientific critical questions to the text, in order to ascertain what Jesus' fast may have meant to himself and to his immediate followers. Such a critique follows.

Malina and Rohrbaugh see Jesus' forty day fast and subsequent temptation as a rite of passage for an Israelite holy man. Parallels can certainly be seen in Moses (Ex 34:28) and Elijah (1 Ki 19:7-9). According to Malina and Rohrbaugh, the temptation by Satan is in fact a test administered by God:

A temptation is a test of loyalty, in this case loyalty to God. The loyalty test is administered by Satan... a cosmic personage whose name ("Satan") comes from Persia where it designated the role of a secret-service agent who worked under cover testing people's loyalty to the king. This role was borrowed by analogy to

describe the origin of tests of loyalty to God in Israel, for example Job 1. In Job, Satan is still a part of God's council, but about the 3rd century B.C.E., Satan was ascribed an anti-God role. He was a rogue secret-service agent who recruited anti-God persons on his own behalf. His temptations became both a testing and a recruiting device.

(Malina & Rohrbaugh 2003:36)

For Malina and Rohrbaugh, the essential factor in becoming an Israelite holy man is the ability to control the spirit world.

Jesus' experience and successful passing of this test is a further step toward becoming an Israelite holy man. By remaining loyal to God in the face of the devil's (= Satan's) test, Jesus demonstrates that he has acquired the necessary skills to deal with and control the spirit world.

(Malina & Rohrbaugh 2003:37)

This manipulation of the spirit world would later be seen in Jesus' various miracles of healing and casting out demons, recorded throughout the Synoptic gospels. A rigorous test, such as Jesus' fasting and temptation, would be required to place Jesus into the company of the great holy men of Israel, and to acquire the honor necessary for such a role. This honor would be acquired in two ways; first, Jesus gains honor through his survival and perseverance of the forty day fast. Such feats of physical, mental, and psychological endurance gain the respect of others. Second, Jesus gains honor from Satan by successfully meeting his challenges and refusing to succumb to temptation.

Malina and Rohrbaugh note that this battle for honor goes beyond Jesus' ability to overcome the physical discomfort associated with prolonged fasting. Rather, Jesus' dyad is challenged; his identity and status as the Son of God. Jesus gains honor for his heavenly Father by remaining loyal to him when challenged.

Note that what is being challenged here is Jesus' loyalty to God, hence his status as Son of God. Jesus' honorific status, reported by Matthew and contrary to his status at birth, is under siege. By appealing to the words of his patron/father, Jesus successfully defends the claim, and the devil is forced to await a new opportunity. Again, since a private challenge-riposte would gain nothing, Matthew allows the reader to be the confirming public such an event requires.

(Malina & Rohrbaugh 2003:37)

There are other factors present which would have, in the minds of Matthew's original audience, placed Jesus into the company of the great holy men of Israel. Harrington notes the significance of the number 'forty': 'The number "forty" may relate to the forty years in the wilderness during which Israel was tested, though it more directly refers to the forty-day fasts undertaken by Moses and Elijah' (Harrington 1991:66). Certainly, an early Jewish audience would associate Jesus' forty day fast with those of Moses and Elijah, and the forty days Jesus spent in the wilderness would bring to mind the forty years that the Israelites wandered in the wilderness. Clearly, the purpose of this account is to create an association in the minds of Matthew's audience between Jesus and the great prophetic tradition of Israel.

Jesus' responses to Satan's temptations depict his fulfillment of the law, as Brown, Fitzmyer, and Murphy note:

The symbolic character of the narrative is evident; the temptations and Jesus' answers define the true character of his Messianic mission. The answer of Jesus to all three questions is taken from Dt (8:3; 6:13, 16). The use of this source shows that the Law itself reveals the true character of messiahship.

(Brown *et al* 1968:68)

Additionally, Jesus' fasting and temptation indicate the spiritual nature of his mission: 'Jesus does not fulfill his mission by providing for basic physical necessities, but by proclaiming the word that is life' (Brown *et al.* 1968:69).

In addition to Jesus' association with Moses, Elijah, and the Israelite nation through his forty day fast in the wilderness, parallels can be seen with the experience of Adam and Eve in Genesis 1-3. Both accounts have several elements in common.

First, and most obvious, is the abstention from food. For Adam and Eve, this abstention was partial: 'And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it, you shall surely die"' (Gn 3:16-17). Jesus' fast was absolute: he ate nothing for forty days. Adam and Eve's fast was indefinite.

Presumably, they would have continued indefinitely in the garden of Eden had they not eaten the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Jesus' fast was of a specific duration – forty days. In each instance of fasting and temptation, Satan is depicted as tempting his subject(s) in three ways: the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. 1 John 2:16 indicates that this triad of temptation is a natural part of the created order: 'For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world.'

The result of Jesus' fasting and temptation is juxtaposed against that of Adam and Eve. Jesus resisted the temptations of the devil and banished him. God validated Jesus by sending angels to minister to him (Mt 4:10-11). On the contrary, Adam and Eve succumbed to Satan's temptation, sinned, and were shamed and banished (Gn 3:6-7, 24). Table 4.1, below, illustrates the similarities and differences between the fasting and temptation of Adam and Eve, on the one hand, and Jesus on the other.

Table 4.1: Fasting in the initiation of the Old and New covenants

Point of comparison	Old covenant	New covenant	Text
Fast	Partial (only certain foods)	Absolute	Gn 3:2-3; Mt 4:2
Social	Adam and Eve fasted together	Jesus fasted alone	Gn 3:2-3; Mt 4:1-2
Participant(s)	Adam, Eve	Jesus (the last Adam – 1 Corinthians 15:45)	Gn 3:2-3; Mt 4:1-2
Duration	Indefinite	40 days	Gn 2:16-17; Mt 4:2
Temptation: Lust of the flesh	Food – 'the tree was good for food'	Food – 'turn these stones into bread'	Gn 3:6-7; Mt 4:3-4
Temptation: Lust of the eyes	Food – the fruit was a delight to the eyes	The kingdoms of the world and their glory	Gn 3:6-7; Mt 4:8-9
Temptation: Pride of life	The tree was to be desired to make one wise	Glory – a public miracle	Gn 3:6-7; Mt 4:5-7
Outcome	Adam and Eve sinned	Jesus did not sin	Gn 3:6-7; Mt 4:11
Result	Adam and Eve banished from the Garden of Eden – God's disapproval	Angelic ministry to Jesus – God's favor	Gn 3:24; Mt 4:11

The context is significant when interpreting Jesus' forty-day fast. Jesus engaged in this fast at the beginning of his ministry. As noted above, this forty-day fast would clearly

place Jesus into the lineage of the prophets of Israel, and would gain honor needed for his ministry. There is clearly more implied, however, in the text. Jesus fasted with a spirit of reliance on God, and cited scripture as a response to Satan's temptations. His intent seems to be not merely to gain honor, but to bring honor to God through his fast.

What implications might this text have for a New Testament theology of fasting? Several significant themes emerge, which are outlined below:

- Jesus' forty day fast is theologically significant in terms of validating his ministry. He clearly places himself in the lineage of the prophetic ministry of Israel from Moses to Elijah.
- Fasting, in this text, is closely tied to the experience of temptation. As noted above, parallels exist between the absolute fast of Jesus and the partial fast of Adam and Eve, and their subsequent temptations.
- Fasting in this text, as in several other New Testament texts, is connected to prayer.
- In this pericope, fasting gains honor from God the Father toward Jesus the Son, but Jesus' fasting is also presented as bringing honor to the Father, as Jesus appeals to the honor of God as the basis for resisting temptation.

4.2.4 Sincere, private fasting- 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.

(Matthew 6:16-18)

The Sermon on the Mount is perhaps the most significant moral discourse of Jesus. In this text, Jesus presents his teaching on fasting in the context of personal piety and the fulfillment of the old covenant.

In Matthew 6:1-18, Jesus deals with the three pillars of Jewish piety: almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. Wimmer (1982:52-53) argues that the broader context of this text, from Matthew 6:2-18, form a cohesive unit. Mitchell responds to Wimmer thus:

Wimmer rightly contends that these verses are a unit. However, he wrongly argues that almsgiving (vv. 2-4), prayer (vv. 5-13), and fasting (vv. 16-18) are of equal importance. This view is unacceptable for two reasons: (1) Almsgiving and fasting are each mentioned in only three verses, whereas nine verses are devoted to prayer. (2) a cursory survey of the four Gospels reveals a tremendous amount of teachings, commands, and practices concerning prayer, while very little space is devoted to almsgiving and fasting. Of the three practices (almsgiving, prayer, and fasting), fasting has been the most disjunctive and debated in the history of the church.

(Mitchell 1990:457)

One question which emerges in Jesus' discussion fasting in the Sermon on the Mount is whether fasting is commanded. Jesus does not command his disciples to fast, but here and elsewhere assumes that they will fast.³⁹ Thus his instruction on fasting begins from the starting point of contemporary Jewish practice of the discipline. As Mitchell observes, 'When He dealt with the subject, it was usually in response to the practice as observed by the Jews' (Mitchell 1990:457). The Jews often associated fasting with prayer and almsgiving⁴⁰, as Jesus does here. It may not be entirely accurate to say, as Leon-Dufour asserts, that the Bible 'specifies the meaning of fasting and regulates its practice' (Leon-Dufour 1973:166), as one finds very few regulations for fasting in the Bible, particularly in comparison with observances such as the sacrificial system or the observance of the Sabbath. However, Leon-Dufour is correct in his assertion that '[a]long with prayer and almsgiving, it is one of the essential acts which express to God man's humility, hope, and love' (Leon-Dufour 1973:166). Thus Jesus is speaking in this text within the broad tradition of Jewish thought when he associates fasting with prayer and almsgiving. In the Section that follows, an attempt is made to interpret Jesus'

³⁹ See Matthew 9:15, Mark 2:19-20 and Luke 5:34-35.

⁴⁰ 'Almsgiving, prayer, and fasting went together as the three traditional Jewish practices of righteousness in the first century.... Clearly these are "traditional righteousness," as expected (Stassen 2003:284).

teaching on fasting in this context. Several themes will emerge, including the themes of hypocrisy, honor, and asceticism.

4.2.4.1 Exegesis

Jesus' teaching on fasting in Matthew 6:16-18 is clearly linked in this chapter to his teaching on almsgiving (Mt 6:2-4), prayer (Mt 6:5-13), and forgiveness. A similar textual construction, a triad, is used to express the proper function of each of these acts of piety. Stassen notes:

All four triads conclude with "Your Father who sees in secret will reward you," or "knows what you need" or "will forgive you." The reference to God as "your Father" means the practices of righteousness are based on trust in the prophetic hope of God's renewal and deliverance being effected through Jesus' mission, a relationship of grace and presence.

(Stassen 2003:284)

Jesus' language links almsgiving, prayer, forgiveness, and fasting together as acts of private devotion, rather than public display, the efficacy of which depends on the Father seeing in secret and rewarding the pious observer.

Furthermore, the triadic structure shows Jesus teaching transforming initiatives that participate in the reign of the gracious God who acts in love toward enemies, who is present to disciples in secret, who is faithful and trustworthy, and who brings deliverance from the vicious cycles that cause violations of traditional righteousness.

(Stassen 2003:308)

Indeed, in Matthew 6:1, Jesus introduces his subject by saying 'Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven (Mt 6:1).' This represents a shift in emphasis from the previous material in Matthew's record of the Sermon on the Mount, as Stassen notes:

As in his introductory statement in 5:17-21 indicating that the following teachings would concern traditional *commands*, so in his introduction in 6:1 to the next section, Matthew indicates that the *traditional righteousness* will now concern traditional *practices*. Thus the form will differ a bit: it will begin with a practice, not a teaching.

(Stassen 2003:283)

Thus a common theme among Jesus' teaching on almsgiving, prayer, forgiveness, and fasting emerges early in his sermon – these acts, as private and personal acts of piety, will not be subject to the concept of honor, which has been established to have been prevalent in the social and cultural milieu of the world of the gospels.

Several distinct elements of Jesus' teaching on fasting in this text emerge. First is the instruction 'do not put on a gloomy face, as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance in order to be seen fasting by men' (Mt. 6:16). This message may have seemed self-contradictory to Jesus' audience, as fasting was seen as a form of communication which demonstrated one's humility before God and one's neighbors.

However, Jesus is found in the gospel of Matthew warning that conventional acts of piety may become acts of hypocrisy, and condemning such hypocrisy:

In light of the literary connections between the first and second sections of the sermon noted above, as well as the fact that these groups are castigated elsewhere in the Gospel as hypocrites (15:7; 22:18; 23:13-15, 23, 25, 27, 29), it is likely that the evangelist's explication of this superior righteousness extends through the antitheses (5:21-48) to include the instruction in 6:1-18.

(Wilson 2010:480)

In fact, Jesus' repudiation of the use of traditional acts of piety to gain honor is a common theme in the gospel of Matthew, as Wilson notes:

By the same token, there is a consensus in scholarship also that the social interactions of the Matthean community with its Jewish milieu were marked by increasing disaffection and estrangement, especially vis-à-vis emerging rabbinic Judaism. Insofar as it represents a response to these developments, Matthew's refashioning of the Jesus story assumes an important ideological function, namely, to legitimate the distinctive commitments and alternative identity of his group in terms of the established cultural idiom.

(Wilson 2010:479)

A possible explanation can be found in the purpose of fasting in the honor culture of the first-century Mediterranean world:

The disfigurement was a part of the ritual of grief or mourning in the ancient world; “sackcloth and ashes” were put on to make the person unsightly. These are rejected as mere external display. The disciple who fasts should wash and anoint himself; washing and anointing were preparations for a banquet, not signs of grief and affliction.

(Brown *et al.* 1968:74)

Members of the Matthean community is (sic) encouraged to perform their acts of piety without pretence and in private where only God can see, not like the hypocrites who parade their pious acts in public to gain praise... In an honour and shame society one’s good reputation was sustained by the esteem of others who have benefited from one’s public actions. Jesus therefore opposes a fundamental societal pattern.

(Viljoen 2012:17)

In the high-context society in which Jesus lived, the act of fasting would communicate a specific message to one’s neighbors. Jesus’ intent in this text seems to be that fasting should be a form of communication with God, rather than to others, as Malina and Rohrbaugh note:

Not eating is intended to be a form of communication, something like not speaking to others when one is angry. Silence then means, “I am displeased.” Fasting says, “help me in my affliction,” and the disfigured face communicates that need to neighbors. Clean-faced fasting, surely a novelty, would be noticed by God alone! What is being asked here is thus that the “communication” be redirected from neighbors to God.

(Malina & Rohrbaugh 2003:49)

Fasting to be seen by others, and to be acknowledged by them as holy, is a form of acquired honor: ‘Acquired honor is the socially recognized claim to worth that a person obtains by achievements, such as benefactions... or prowess’ (Malina 1991:28). Honor was a primary concern in the first-century Mediterranean world, and Jesus’ intent in discussing fasting as with immediately previous instruction concerning almsgiving and prayer, is clearly to provide perspective on public piety in an honor society.

Jesus associates facial disfigurement (an evident, outward display of the discomfort of fasting) with hypocrisy, indicating that the one fasting is only attempting to communicate with his or her contemporaries in an attempt to gain honor, rather than fasting to God.

As Mitchell notes: ‘Some practiced this type of fasting as a means of seeking to gain the reputation of being godly’ (Mitchell 1990:458). It is this attempt to gain honor through fasting that Jesus condemns as hypocrisy, just as he has condemned the use of alms giving (Mt 6:2), and prayer (Mt 6:5). ‘In each case there is a warning against succumbing to the temptation, the *vicious cycle*, of practicing righteousness for show and expecting a reward from God (6:2b, 5b, 7b, 16b)’ (Stassen 2003:284).

Bultmann notes that Jesus does not condemn almsgiving, prayer, or fasting, but emphasized that these acts of piety are not a means of gaining honor: ‘Neither did he oppose *the pious practices of Judaism* – almsgiving, prayer, and fasting – though he did protest against their being put into the service of personal vanity and so becoming a lie’ (Bultmann 1951:16, emphasis in the original). As Harrington notes, ‘[w]hat is criticized in Matthew 6:16-18 is ostentatious behavior during private fasts’ (Harrington 1991:96).

Some scholars are of the opinion that Jesus is particularly concerned with the washing of the face and the anointing of the head, but not with other culturally encoded signs of repentance, remorse, or sorrow associated with fasting. Levine, for instance, notes:

[H]ere Jesus objects to only one practice: not to the wearing of sackcloth, not to the sitting on the ground, not to the public prayer ritual, nor to any of the other familiar practices, but *only* to the “disfiguring of the face.” Had ostentation been the *fundamental* issue, one would expect there to have been a proscription against all outward manifestations of fasting.

(Levine 1999:1-2, emphasis in the original)⁴¹

⁴¹ Levine treats this subject with the utmost detail, going so far as to make a distinction between wood ashes and dust: ‘Although conceivably Jesus could have merely instructed the faithful to strew dust rather than wood ashes, not only would they “appear to men to be fasting,” but they would appear to be following the normative practice, since it cannot easily be ascertained at a glance whether a penitent has strewn his head with wood ashes or with dust. And if wood ashes evoke vicarious atonement from the Binding of Isaac, and his supposed “resurrection” and ongoing intercession on behalf of Israel, then Jesus’ own ministry and subsequent self-sacrifice are rendered redundant. It is small wonder therefore, that the Matthean text goes so far as to have Jesus instruct the faithful with an opposite injunction: not only to refrain from strewing ashes over their heads, but, “But you, when you fast, anoint your head, and wash your face (vs. 17)”’; Levine 1999:3). Wilson’s intricate concern on cosmetics seems to miss the point of Jesus’ teaching here – ostentation is clearly what Jesus has in mind; as he indicates in Matthew 6:1, he is teaching against practicing one’s righteousness before men, in whatever form that may take.

Contrary to Levine, Jesus in Matthew 6:1 warns against practicing one's righteousness to be seen. It is not necessary for Jesus to articulate every way in which fasting might be manifested outwardly. In fact, to do so would be quite incongruous with the remainder of the text.

Levine rightly points out that Jesus' audience should be familiar with the moral and spiritual point he is making, as it was a common theme among Jewish prophets that a right motive must accompany acts of piety:

The populace was well aware that not outer appearances but inner contrition and repentance are what elicit (sic) divine succor. For, as the Mishnah records, at the very onset of a communal fast, "The eldest among them would declare before them words of admonition: Brethren, it is not written of the people of Nineveh that 'God saw their sackcloth and their fasting,' but 'and God saw their deeds, that they had turned from their evil way' (Jonah 3:10). And in tradition it says, 'Rend your heart and not your garments' (Joel 2:13)."

(Levine 1999:2)

The correlation between Jesus' teaching in this text and the continuity of Jewish tradition reinforces the previously asserted view that Jesus is teaching about fasting as practiced within contemporary Judaism. Jesus is not a complete radical, demolishing all traces of Jewish practice; rather, in his Messianic role, he is calling the people to the true practice of Judaism – the right actions undertaken with the right motives. Thus, Jesus' teaching about fasting was consistent with Jewish tradition in regard to acts of piety in general. However, it is clear from other texts in the gospels that Jesus' audience would have been familiar with those who 'trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt' (Lk 18:9) and used acts of piety to gain honor, in contradiction of the kinds of warnings that Levine cites above. That spiritual practices were abused in first-century Judaism should be no more surprising than to see them abused in any other context.

Not only does Jesus command his audience not to intentionally disfigure their appearance in order to be seen as fasting, and thus to gain honor, but he indicates that the pious will intentionally avoid being seen as fasting: 'But you, whenever you fast,

anoint your head, and wash your face so that you may not be seen fasting by men, but by your Father who is in secret' (Mt 6:17-18a). As with his previous admonitions against conspicuous piety, Jesus promises that 'your Father who sees in secret will repay you' (Mt 6:18). That is, Jesus is advocating a piety that is deliberately inconspicuous. Jesus directs his audience to think of time and space in a way that were beyond the purview of one's neighbors – the 'secret place' and the 'inner room'. His concern is that these acts of piety in order to be shared with God alone, and to be rewarded by God alone:

References to "the secret place" and the "inner room" (6:6), for example, are to be taken not as references to the household or a "private chapel," but as symbolic language for "what is inward" in the human personality, one's inner thoughts and intentions, what Matthew refers to elsewhere as the "heart" (5:8,28; 6:21; 15:7-9,18-19), which ought to be directed fully and exclusively toward God. Even a seemingly realistic statement like the command to wash one's face when fasting (6:17), then, has relevance principally in its power to stir the imagination.

(Wilson 2010:477-478)

Wilson contends that washing and anointing, as Jesus directs here, may not necessarily refer to specific physical actions, but may refer to that which makes one's fasting personal, secret, or hidden: 'Washing is not only an expression of everyday life but also a figurative illustration of hiddenness. The listener himself or herself has to determine what 'washing and anointing' means tangibly' (Luz 1989:361; see also Nolland 2005:274). One might counter that if Jesus' command to wash the face and anoint the head are not taken literally, but figuratively, to be subjectively interpreted by the audience, then the command not to disfigure the face may also be subject to such private interpretation, when clearly, Jesus is concerned that his audience not merely internalize the process of fasting, but that they make their fasting as inconspicuous as possible.

It is significant to note that in this text, Jesus does not indicate that the 'gloomy face' against which he cautions is not indicative of actual discomfort. That is, Jesus does not indicate that any discomfort which may be indicated through facial distortion is not real discomfort. As Jesus well knew that the hunger of fasting could be an unpleasant experience. Western audiences seeing disfiguring of the face juxtaposed against the

title 'hypocrite' may think of deception – one portraying oneself as being in an exaggerated degree of discomfort, for example. This is not implied in the Biblical text. Such a consideration does, however, lead one to consider the subject of asceticism in the context of fasting. Jesus warns against publicly displaying the very real discomfort of fasting, with the understanding that fasting may produce discomfort (in fact, this discomfort was the basis of the use of fasting as means to acquiring honor, which Jesus condemns).

What does this text say about asceticism? Is fasting necessarily a form of asceticism, or necessarily one that is extreme or unhealthy? Wilson associates asceticism with the communication of a specific intended message, though the potential exists that the message may be misinterpreted by the audience:

the ascetic makes available for view the “figured” or “encoded” subject, the self that corresponds to the goal of ascetical activity. The audience thereby elicited apprehends what the performance signifies in the context of the ascetic’s reformulated worldview. To the gaze of this audience, the performance of a practice such as extreme fasting, for example, signifies “a real, truthful subject,” while to all others it “only signifies sickness and delusion”.

(Wilson 2010:483)

Perhaps this potential for misinterpretation of the message of fasting in a high-context society such as the first-century Mediterranean world is a factor in Jesus’ admonition that private fasting be done in secret, before the Father who sees in secret (and who, because of his omniscience, will not mistake the meaning of the act).

Valantasis defines asceticism as ‘performances within a dominant social environment intended to inaugurate a new subjectivity, different social relations, and an alternative symbolic universe’ (Valantasis 1995:797). When this idea is applied to the text at hand, it becomes clear how fasting to gain honor may change social relationships, and create an ‘alternative symbolic universe’. Fasting, an act which should communicate humility, produces the opposite effect: honor. Jesus’ teaching in the gospel of Matthew is replete with reversals: the first shall be last (Mt 20:16), the child is an example of faith (Mt 18:4), he who would be exalted must humble himself (Mt 23:12). These reversals are

presented as positive, from the perspective of Jesus' followers. Perhaps Jesus' warning against conspicuous fasting is a prohibition against a negative reversal: an act of piety which is carried out with a self-serving motive will lead not to honor, but to dishonor.

Wilson expands on Valantasis' theory of asceticism, asserting that the primary thrust of asceticism, for Valantasis, is the intention behind the act:

At the heart of Valantasis' theory of asceticism is the concept of intentionality. An act such as fasting should not be assumed *ipso facto* to be ascetical. Instead, what renders it an ascetical act is its agent's intention to instantiate "a subjectivity alternative to the prescribed cultural subjectivity" (Valantasis 1995:795), a new identity over against the socially authorized forms of identity available in a given cultural frame.

(Wilson 2010:481).

In other words, as fasting was intended to demonstrate humility in Jesus' cultural context (the 'socially authorized form of identity'), fasting to gain honor (the 'new identity') became a form of asceticism. It is against this form of asceticism that Jesus speaks in this text.

Fasting is not necessarily an act of asceticism, and must not necessarily be committed in secret to be legitimate, according to Wilson. He draws a distinction between fasting which is ascetical (that is, that which subverts cultural norms) and that which is enculturating (that which reinforces cultural norms):

For example, when the members of a synagogue fast in a manner prescribed by the tradition (say, on Yom Kippur), the action is best described as enculturating rather than ascetical, since its effect is to abet the participants' socialization into their normative cultural setting, in this case the synagogue community. If certain members of the community break from tradition, however, and initiate different patterns or interpretations of fasting in order to develop an alternative to the social and religious givens of their environment, their action could be understood to be ascetical.

(Wilson 2010:481; see also Abrahams 1967:125)

Carter likewise notes that fasting carries a specific cultural meaning, which stands in contradiction to the norms of the unbelieving world:

Disciples live a lifestyle that is out of step with and resistant to Rome's imperial ways.... In these difficult circumstances, they must remain focused on God's empire, strengthened not only by the words of Jesus and disciplines of prayer and fasting (6:1-18), but also by one another.

(Carter 2000:183, 185)

4.2.4.2 A social-scientific interpretation

Once more, honor is the primary social custom in view. Jesus does not renounce the acquisition of honor – indeed, he is depicted in the gospels as acquiring and ascribing honor, and engaging in challenge-riposte confrontations to gain honor. Jesus is very much a man of his world, and does not attempt here to dismantle the social custom of honor. He does, however, draw a clear distinction between honor in the eyes of God, and social honor. He states that the pillars of piety (prayer, fasting, and almsgiving) should be used to gain honor from God, rather than from one's contemporaries. In this, there is the sense that true piety rises above social conventions; that although religious people (even Jesus himself) may operate within the context of specific social realia, God does not acquiesce to these norms, and is concerned with one's inner intentions and motivations, rather than with mere conformity to social expectations. Jesus also indicates that honor among one's peers, even religious honor, does not equate to honor from God. It does not matter to God if one's peers see him as pious, for God sees the heart.

4.2.4.3 Conclusions

In this text, Jesus does not decry fasting, any more than he does almsgiving, forgiveness, or prayer. However, in each of these acts of piety, Jesus identifies the danger of the conspicuous use of these acts to gain honor. Those who give alms, pray, or fast specifically to be seen and honored receive the appellation 'hypocrites'. Jesus gives specific instruction regarding the physical appearance of the one fasting, so that fasting may not become an ascetical act designed to gain honor, thereby resulting in dishonor in the eyes of God. Rather, fasting that is performed for God alone, and seen by God alone, will result in honor.

How does this text contribute to a theology of fasting in the New Testament? Several points emerge:

- Jesus continued the Jewish tradition of associating the acts of almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. Jesus' ideas about fasting were not a radical departure from tradition, but a continuation and expansion of tradition.
- Jesus' concern regarding fasting is that it should result in honor from God, not from one's human observers. As Rudolf Schnackenburg notes, 'Jesus nowhere repudiates the pious practices themselves, what he was concerned with was rather the need for a genuinely religious and moral attitude towards God' (Schnackenburg 1965:72).
- Jesus places fasting into a moral, and not merely spiritual, context.
- Jesus assumes that his followers will fast, but does not command fasting. Thus, a Christologically-focused spirituality has a place for the act of fasting. As Levine notes:

Yet even if Jesus shared the reluctance to burden his followers with communal fasting, nowhere in the New Testament is fasting *per se* delegitimated (sic). Jesus himself is depicted as fasting during the forty days of the Temptation (Mt. 4:1ff.), and here, in the Teaching on the Mountain according to Matthew, just as Jesus instructs his followers *how* to give charity (vss. 1-4) and *how* to pray (vss. 5-8), so does he instruct them *how* to fast (vss. 16-18), with no intimation of present or future abolition of any of these practices.

(Levine 1999:1; emphasis in the original)

Stassen summarizes the crux of this text as follows:

Our practices of righteousness are participation in God's delivering love. They show God's light, so that when people see them they give glory to our Father who is in heaven (5:16). If Jesus' listeners do not demand that God's grace requires human passivity, but rather delivers them into active participation in God's delivering love, then this is a celebration of God's grace.

(Stassen 2003:284)

4.2.5 By prayer and fasting- Matthew 17:14-21, Mark 9:29

When they came to the crowd, a man came up to Jesus, falling on his knees before Him and saying, “Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is a lunatic and is very ill; for he often falls into the fire and often into the water. I brought him to Your disciples, and they could not cure him.” And Jesus answered and said, “You unbelieving and perverted generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring him here to Me.” And Jesus rebuked him, and the demon came out of him, and the boy was cured at once. Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, “Why could we not drive it out?” And He said to them, “Because of the littleness of your faith; for truly I say to you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible to you. “But this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting.”

(Matthew 17:14-21)

The first truly problematic (from a textual perspective) fasting texts in the New Testament are Matthew 17:21 and Mark 9:29. In each gospel account, the same scenario is represented: a boy is possessed by a demon. While Jesus has been on the Mount of Transfiguration with Peter, James, and John (Mt 17:1-3; Mk 9:2-13), some of his other disciples (neither text specifies how many) have attempted to cast the demon out of the boy without success. Jesus descends the mountain to find a crowd gathered around the scene, his disciples perplexed at their failure to cast out the demon. After a brief interview with the boy’s father, Jesus exorcises the demon. The accounts in both Matthew and Mark end with Jesus saying that ‘this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting.’ Fasting in this context is problematic enough, as shall be discussed below, but in addition to the hermeneutical problem of placing fasting into the context of this exorcism, a textual problem exists: there is mixed manuscript evidence for Jesus’ reference to fasting in these texts. Many of the earliest texts do not contain this reference.

Below, the textual problem is briefly sketched. Then, the relevance of this textual problem for the present study is discussed. Finally, an interpretation of the text is provided.

4.2.5.1. Textual history

Many commentators believe that the reference to fasting in Matthew 17:21 is not original, that it has been added by a later scribe: 'A number of mss. add this verse based on Mk 9:29 with the addition of "fasting" to "prayer"; but it does not belong to the critical text' (Brown *et al.* 1968:94). The assumption is that a scribe in the Marcan tradition added the reference to fasting in an attempt to validate his faith community's view on the role of fasting in exorcism, as Achtemeier notes:

The purpose of this addition is also clear: in this way, Mk has adapted the story to fit into this section (8:27-10:45) whose theme is the instruction of the disciples. That this is Marcan adaptation is further indicated by the fact that while the point of vss. 28-29 is the power of prayer, the point of the story is the power of faith (vss. 19, 23-24; so also Mt understood it). Had Mk wanted to continue that emphasis, he knew the tradition by means of which to do it (cf. 11:22-23; it is the one Mt later chose). In that light, Mk's choice of prayer as the final emphasis seems deliberate. The best explanation appears to be that such an emphasis met a particular need in the community for which Mk was writing. Later tradition added the phrase "and fasting."

(Achtemeier 1975:476)

According to this view, the text was redacted to impose a meaning upon it that was not originally imbedded in the text, but which fits the purpose of the redactor.

We would conclude, then, that the point of this pericope as it now stands in its Marcan context centers not on the miracle as such, but on the disciples as miracle workers, and their failure, with the resulting instruction to them. This point, already implicit in the story, has been made explicit by vss. 28-29, added very likely by Mk, who has then included this story in his section on Instruction to the Disciples (8:27-10:45)

(Achtemeier 1975:478)

Some scholars take this account to be an early Christian creation, compiled from traditions which pre-date the written text, as Sterling explains:

The evidence which we have assembled suggests that Christian traditioners and authors found the earliest version loaded with latent meanings. The different traditioners chose to concentrate on the different figures in the pericope: some on Jesus, others on the disciples, and still others on the father. This implies that we have, rather than competing interpretations vying with one another, a collection of early efforts to draw out the possibilities of the story for the Christian faith. The absence of clear Marcan redactional activity in the seams of the additions to the tradition suggests the possibility that the interpretations were collected before their incorporation in Mark.

(Sterling 1993:489)

Sterling believes that miracle stories, such as this one, were deliberately invented to serve the needs of the early church:

The issue must be more pointed, since a tradition which arose as a result of an event in Jesus' life could serve the needs of early Christians just as well as a story which they invented. Nor is the question whether or not early Christians invented miracle stories: I am convinced they did.

(Sterling 1993:490)

Sterling asserts that the miracle story in this text was composed to add legitimacy to the early church's view of its mission by magnifying the power of Jesus:

From the second angle we may ask this: Is there anything in the story which betrays a specific concern of the early Church? The key here is the presupposition that the disciples were practicing exorcists during their association with the historical Jesus. Were they? Our answer to this question depends upon whether or not we believe that Jesus commissioned the disciples as exorcists. To put the question in more familiar terms: Did he send them out on a mission? If the mission is the creation of early Christians, then this pericope was probably invented to magnify the sovereign power of Jesus by contrasting it with the subordinate power of Christian exorcists. If, on the other hand, the mission is authentic, then the story *could* go back to a historical event. Although the issue is complicated and certainty is not possible, I am inclined to think that Jesus did commission his disciples. Did he empower them as exorcists in this mission? In the sayings tradition, Jesus associates exorcisms with the kingdom of heaven. Since this is one of the few sayings which is almost universally considered authentic, there is no reason why he might not have shared his authority with the disciples who were to help him inaugurate the kingdom.

(Sterling 1993:490-491, emphasis in the original)

Sterling notes that the response given by Jesus, 'this kind comes out only by prayer and fasting', does not fit the context of the story, as Jesus has not been recorded as having been praying and fasting just before the exorcism, nor were prayer or fasting recorded as part of the exorcism. He attempts to explain the apparent incongruity:

The problem with this answer is that it does not fit the context – there is nothing about prayer in the preceding story. The point of the answer was cleverly captured by a subsequent scribe who added και νηστεία to the manuscript tradition. The scribe, recognizing that the answer was addressed to Christian exorcists, expanded it to incorporate fasting, which had become more and more important. The shorter answer in the Marcan text requires of those who would like to be

Christian exorcists that they rely on the power of Jesus through prayer. The motivation for the addition most likely arose from the need to explain why the disciples experienced a failure and how contemporary Christian exorcists could avoid one.

(Sterling 1993:489)

The focus of the present study is to interpret fasting in the New Testament, and to apply this interpretation to contemporary Evangelical spirituality. Thus, it is relevant to consider here Evangelicalism's view of the inerrancy and inspiration of scripture, and the relevance of this doctrine for interpreting problematic texts such as the ones under present scrutiny.

Evangelicalism will be defined in greater detail in Chapter 5; however, for the present discussion, some explanation is in order. Contemporary Evangelicalism holds a high view of the inerrancy of the Old Testament and New Testament. Evangelical theology can be traced to the early days of the church, and places priority on the Bible as the inerrant Word of God. Rennie writes:

Evangelical theology goes back to the creeds of the first centuries of the Christian era, in which the early church sought to correlate the teaching of Scripture, penetrates its meaning and defend it. In concert with the thought of this period, evangelical theology affirms that: The Bible is the truthful revelation of God and through it the life-giving voice of God speaks...

(Rennie1988:239)

Rennie also notes the theological connection between Evangelicalism and the Protestant Reformation's emphasis on the Bible as revelation: 'Evangelical theology has particular ties with the distinctives of the Protestant Reformation. It is deeply committed to the centrality of the Bible' (1988:239).

For Evangelicals, the doctrine of the inspiration of the Bible is not merely academic, but is viewed as a fundamental tenet of Christianity, particularly in relation to Christian devotion:

Finally, it should be emphasized that evangelical theology is what might be termed a spiritual theology. It has a way of doing theology which is again part of the great theological tradition. It is 'live' orthodoxy. The Bible is not only central to the theological enterprise, but it is meditated upon and prayed over as well as studied.

(Rennie 1988:240)

Donald Bloesch notes that 'as evangelical orthodoxy developed it tended more and more to identify the Bible with divine revelation, to regard the words of the Bible as the immediate or direct words of God' (1994:35).

Evangelicalism was strongly impacted by the Fundamentalist movement in the United States and Britain, and through the writings of the Fundamentalists, the doctrine of inerrancy was articulated in ways that have come to be significant in defining contemporary evangelicalism. One Fundamentalist author, writing in the original tract series titled 'The Fundamentals', from which the movement was named, wrote: 'We mean by inspiration that the words composing Bible are God-breathed. If they are not, then the Bible is not inspired at all, since it is composed only and solely of words' (Munhall 1917:45). Another writes:

... the authenticity and credibility of the Bible are assumed, by which is meant (1) that its books were written by the authors to whom they are ascribed, and that their contents are in all material points as when they came from their hands; and (2) that those contents are worthy of entire acceptance as to their statements of fact.

(Gray 1917:9)

The New Hampshire Baptist Confession of Faith was widely published in America, and has been influential in articulating an evangelical view of the inerrancy of the Bible. It states:

We believe that the Holy Bible was written by men divinely inspired, and is a perfect treasure of heavenly instruction; that it has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth without any mixture of error for its matter; that it reveals the principles by which God will judge us; and therefore is, and shall remain to the end of the world, the true centre of Christian union, and the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and opinions should be tried.

(Brown 1883:1)

Further evidence could be marshaled, but the above serves to illustrate that Evangelicals believe in the inerrancy and inspiration of the Old Testament and New Testament. The influence of the doctrine of inspiration on Evangelical theology will be explored in further detail in Chapter 5, but this brief sketch brings to the forefront a relevant approach to the text at hand: whether the reference to fasting was included in the original Matthew or Mark manuscripts, the fact that it is included in the Bible which has been received gives it credibility among Evangelicals. The Evangelical view of scripture dictates that most Evangelicals believe that the Bible was preserved by the providential hand of God, and that the text available today is the Word of God. In this regard, it is not ultimately relevant whether the text is the product of interpretation and revision by the communities of Matthew and Mark, or if the gospel authors originally included the reference to fasting here. These texts represent the application of Jesus' teaching and practice of fasting to a specific situation. The text has associated fasting with prayer, exorcism, and spiritual power, as an extension of Jesus' teaching and ministry. Evangelical Christians can be expected to interpret this text as delivered, and to ascribe the reference to fasting to Jesus, as his early followers clearly have done in this text. Whether the association of fasting with exorcism begins with Jesus, or with Christian communities which interpreted these events after his time, is not ultimately relevant for Evangelicals, as they believe that the final text is the product of divine inspiration.

4.2.5.2. Exegesis

Attention is now turned to the interpretation of fasting in this text. Matthew presents Jesus as offering a rebuke of an 'unbelieving and perverse generation' (Mt 17:17). The context in Matthew makes it clear that this rebuke is addressed to Jesus' disciples. In Matthew 16:8, Jesus has rebuked the same disciples, expressing a similar sentiment ('of little faith'). Likewise, Peter was rebuked as being of little faith, and of doubting, in Matthew 14:31. Each of these rebukes of the disciples is connected to a miracle text. Perhaps Jesus is referring to the faith the disciples should have on the basis of the miracles they have seen him perform. Jesus' explanation in Matthew 17:20 clearly indicates that the disciples were intended in his rebuke as well. The object of Jesus'

rebuke is his disciples' lack of faith. Sterling believes that the story is authentic, and that the disciples' lack of faith is the main hermeneutical thrust of the narrative:

Few today doubt that exorcisms were characteristic of Jesus' ministry. The tradition, therefore, fits nicely into the motif. Is this tradition based on an event in Jesus' life? Three factors lead me to think that it is. First, the traditioners have not recast the tradition in contemporary terms. This is evident from the addition to the tradition in vv 28b-29. Why not rewrite the tradition and portray Jesus at prayer before the exorcism? While the contrast exists only between levels of the tradition, it nonetheless indicates some respect for the existing tradition in this instance. Second, the story is attested in at least two forms. The presence of extensive secondary and tertiary traditions indicates that it was known and told within a significant segment of the early community. This points to an early *Sitz im Leben* for the story. Third, why invent a story about the disciples' failure to exorcise? While their impotence underscores Jesus' potency, it appears to be a case of making a virtue out of a necessity. Could the pericope reflect failures among Christian exorcists? Possibly, but why denigrate the original disciples? Why not someone less important to the Christian tradition? The best explanation is that the embarrassment of their failure became the occasion for the story.

(Sterling1993:492)

Matthew 17:20 places this miracle narrative into the context of personal faith. The disciples were not able to cast out the demon because of 'the littleness of (their) faith' (Mt 17:20). Jesus indicates that faith 'as a mustard seed' would be sufficient to move a mountain, but that the disciples did not have the faith to cast out the demon. Following this well-known text comes the much-disputed statement 'but this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting' (Mt 17:21). Mark's account also clearly relates the exorcism to faith, as Jesus indicates that the father's faith is a crucial factor in the deliverance of his son (Mk 9:22-23). The father clearly understands Jesus' meaning here, for he responds with an affirmation of his faith, and a prayer for increased faith (Mk 9:24). As in Matthew's account, when questioned, Jesus responds that 'this kind cannot come out by anything but prayer and fasting' (Mk 9:29), though there is dispute as the authenticity of 'and fasting' in this text.

What, then does faith have to do with prayer and fasting? One possible interpretation is clear – the disciples had insufficient faith to cast out the demon and deliver the boy, and the faith required for this specific instance was of a magnitude which exceeds that which might be required under other circumstances. 'This kind' (Mk 9:29, Mt 17:21) indicates a

species, as it were, of demon which is more resistant of expulsion than others. Prayer and fasting seem to be presented in the texts as a means of increasing faith.

This is a straightforward interpretation, but is problematic on several levels. Arthur Wallis summarizes these problems, and offers an interpretation:

... if we take the word literally, His statement conflicts with what we learn elsewhere, that Jesus did not fast once His ministry began, nor the disciples while Jesus was with them. Also, the introduction of the thought of fasting here obscures what we believe was the lesson Jesus was impressing on the disciples through their failure to set free the epileptic. It was not that a season of prayer and fasting was necessary before this kind of spirit could be cast out – certainly our Lord did not tarry for this – but that had they been living, like Him, *the life of prayer*, they too could have dealt successfully with this case. This of course does not negative (sic) the fact that fasting is an invaluable aid to prayer in such cases of deliverance, but this does not appear to be the point Jesus was emphasizing.

(Wallis1968:109; emphasis in the original)

Since Jesus was able to cast out the demon on the spot, with no specific prayer and fasting recorded in preparation for this exorcism, perhaps this is a more reasonable explanation. Jesus was a man forged and shaped by fasting and prayer – thus, he had the authority to do what his followers could not do. If this text indeed speaks of fasting, perhaps the best explanation is that the life of devotion, repentance, and faith that is modeled by Jesus, and is expressed in prayer and fasting, is the kind of life that commands spiritual authority. Reedy agrees that the primary purpose of this miracle story is to place an emphasis on Jesus' power and authority.

However its purpose is markedly different in one significant aspect than those miracle accounts of Part I. For there they serve two main functions: (1) to depict Jesus as possessing the power and authority of the Son of God, and (2) by imposing silence upon the demons who recognized him, to create the tension of the Messianic Secret. Here, in vss. 20-26, however, the latter element is significantly absent: "When the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy." There is no proclamation of Jesus as Son of God and no injunction to silence in return. Thus the secrecy aspect is not being emphasized in this miracle; it is rather the power and authority of Jesus that is emphasized here.

(Reedy 1972:194)

Another relevant aspect of the relationship between prayer, faith, fasting, and spiritual authority is the nature (physiological or spiritual) of the ailment. Matthew and Mark

attribute the boy's condition to a demon – indeed, there are numerous accounts of exorcisms in the New Testament. Many modern commentators, such as Wallis above, believe that the boy's symptoms are consistent with epilepsy. Thus, the question is whether Jesus demonstrated power over a supernatural, demonic spirit, or a natural, physiological disease. Matthew and Mark imply that fasting provides authority over demonic forces, as their mythology places demonic activity at the root of many physiological conditions.

Sterling believes that the event occurred, but that the nature of the ailment is not clear:

Our analysis indicates that there are good reasons for concluding that this pericope reflects an actual event in the life of Jesus. What can we say about the event? That on an occasion when the disciples failed to exorcise a boy, Jesus was successful. If we ask what actually happened, we may say that on this occasion the disciples and the people present believed that Jesus freed the boy from the domination of a demon. Since a twentieth-century *Weltanschauung* places demons in the realm of mythology, we are led to ask what might have happened from our perspective. The description of the boy's condition suggests that he was an epileptic. Did the seizure simply end, or did Jesus actually heal the boy? A modern assessment would require that we document the condition of the boy before the healing and for an extended period afterwards. Our inability to do this relativizes any conclusion we might draw and brings us back to the conviction of the disciples: they were persuaded that Jesus changed the boy's condition. We cannot say more.

(Sterling1993:493)

Many critics⁴² have pointed out, as Sterling here, the gospels are written from the worldview of the authors, including aspects of the narrative which a modern audience might find dubious, such as miracles, healings, and encounters with demons. In their worldview, it is asserted, there were mythological explanations which accounted for phenomena for which there was not yet a scientific model. Thus, for example, many diseases would be believed to be the work of demons. However, an Evangelical Christian may, on the basis of a high view of the literal truth of scripture, argue that demons are indeed a spiritual force of evil in the universe (see, e.g., Eph 6:12), and that they are active with malicious intent (1 Pt 5:8). Such an interpretation, when combined with the interpretation given above for this text, would lead to the view that a pious life of

⁴² See, for example, Bultmann (1958:14-15).

prayer and fasting gives the Christian spiritual authority over demonic forces. The idea that activity which the biblical authors attribute to demons is actually physiological in nature might lead a Christian to believe that this text teaches that a lifestyle of prayer and fasting provides authority over physical sickness.

4.2.5.3 A social-scientific interpretation

In Matthew 4:1-11, Jesus is depicted as fasting in the wilderness. This fasting was part of Jesus' initiation into the company of Jewish holy men (see § 4.2.2 above). Through fasting in the wilderness, Jesus takes on a new dyad – that of the holy man, reminiscent of Moses and Elijah. One of the primary requirements to be a Jewish holy man was the ability to exercise authority over demonic forces. Jesus demonstrates such authority in Matthew 4, at the end of his forty day fast. He demonstrates such authority in this text as well, speaking to the demon, and being shown obedience. In turn, he associates such spiritual authority with fasting. As noted, Jesus had not been fasting immediately prior to this exorcism, so his reference is probably to a lifestyle such as his own, which included fasting.

From a social-scientific perspective, this pericope serves to demonstrate that Jesus has acquired honor for himself through his authority over demonic forces. Jesus' ascription of fasting as one source of this authority points to his initiation experience of solitude, fasting, and temptation in the wilderness. He seems to indicate that those who have authority over demonic forces are those who have taken on the dyad of holy men; who have acquired honor through prayer and fasting. One might say that Jesus' encounter with the demon is a case of challenge-riposte. Jesus prevails in the challenge because he has superior honor, acquired through his fasting in the wilderness.

4.2.5.4 Summary and conclusions

The references to fasting in Matthew 17:21 and Mark 9:29 are dubious – many of the most significant texts do not contain references to fasting. However, the inclusion of these texts in contemporary translations makes them relevant to Evangelicals in formulating a picture of fasting in the New Testament. Fasting seems to be out of

context in these texts if Jesus' words are taken to mean that specific type of demon requires prayer and fasting for the express purpose of exorcising it, as Jesus is not depicted as fasting and praying on this instance. However, an interpretation has been put forth that places prayer and fasting into the context of a holy lifestyle which may produce spiritual authority. There is dispute as to whether the subject of the boy's condition was supernatural or physiological; a view of fasting in this text which leads a reader of the Biblical text to the conclusion that prayer and fasting provide authority may conclude, alternatively, that this authority is over demonic forces, or that it applies to physiological conditions.

In articulating the relevance of these texts for developing an Evangelical theology of fasting in the New Testament, several factors emerge:

- Many Evangelical Christians will accept these texts as authentic by virtue of their inclusion in the received canon.
- These accounts place fasting and prayer together into the context of faith. Faith is required to gain spiritual or physical authority over certain aspects of creation.
- If the above interpretation is held, then it is a more natural interpretation of the text to assume that prayer and fasting refer to a way of life similar to that of Jesus, than to prayer and fasting as part of an exorcism ritual.

4.2.6 Fasting and the presence of the Bridegroom- Mark 2:18-20, Luke 5:33-35

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."

(Mark 2:18-20)

And they said to Him, "The disciples of John often fast and offer prayers, the *disciples* of the Pharisees also do the same, but Yours eat and drink." And Jesus said to them, "You cannot make the attendants of the bridegroom fast while the bridegroom is with them, can you? But *the* days will come; and when the bridegroom is taken away from them, then they will fast in those days."

(Luke 5:33-35; emphasis added)

Mark 2:18-20 and Luke 5:33-35 present parallel accounts of a brief conversation between Jesus and a group of questioners (whose identity is not immediately obvious), regarding fasting; specifically, the questioners want to know why various sects of Judaism participate in fasting rituals, but Jesus and his disciples do not. The questioner mentions two groups with which the reader of the New Testament is familiar: the disciples of John the Baptist and the Pharisees. Theologically, these groups were dissimilar in many ways – the Pharisees placed an emphasis on holiness through strict obedience to the law, while John’s Essene background and his Galilean ministry sought personal holiness through separation and a rigorous lifestyle bordering on asceticism. Both groups were fasting while Jesus and his disciples were eating and drinking with ‘tax collectors and sinners’ (Mk 2:15). Luke indicates that the setting was the home of Levi, who had recently been called as a disciple of Jesus (Lk 5:27-28), and that ‘a great crowd of tax collectors and others’ (Lk 5:29) were present, reclining at the table with Jesus.

The contrast is clear: on the one hand, John and his disciples fast out of a rigorous concern for personal righteousness and the Pharisees and their disciples fast in strict observance of the Jewish law, while on the other hand, tax collectors who extort their Jewish brothers in the service of Rome, and ‘sinners’ who show blatant disregard for personal holiness are feasting and drinking. The contrast is not unlike that in Esther, which portrays feasting Persians and fasting Jews, and which had a profound impact on Jewish identity in the first century. Jesus, however, has thrown in his lot with the latter, and is feasting and drinking with tax collectors and sinners. In this context, Jesus is asked to explain his apparent disregard for the fasting being undertaken by other Jews, and his response provides a significant aspect of a theology of fasting in the New Testament. In the Sections that follow, this study will examine these texts in terms of their narrative structure and context, as well as their content, in order to provide an interpretation of Jesus’ response to his questioners, and the relevance of this response to developing a New Testament theology of fasting.

4.2.6.1 Narrative structure and context

This account does not appear randomly in the gospel text. Dewey observes that Mark's account is one of five 'controversy stories' in Mark's gospel, and that it is related to the other four:

It has long been agreed that the five controversy stories of Mark 2:1-3:6 – the healing of the paralytic, the eating with tax collectors and sinners, the question about fasting, plucking grain on the sabbath, and the man with the withered hand – constitute a collection of conflict stories compiled either by Mark or by some earlier collector.

(Dewey1973:394)

These five conflict stories, according to Dewey, form a chiasm:

The five pericopes appear to be combined in a chiastic pattern according to content: A, the healing of the paralytic, contains a healing of the resurrection type; B, the eating with tax collectors and sinners, concerns eating; C, the question about fasting, fasting; B', plucking grain on the Sabbath, eating again; and A', the man with the withered hand, contains another miracle of the resurrection type. The chiastic pattern is also to be seen in details of form and language.

(Dewey1973:395)

Dewey distinguishes the three central controversy stories from the first and last stories in several ways. He notes that none of the three central stories (Jesus eating with tax collectors, the present question about fasting, and Jesus and his disciples plucking grain on the Sabbath) all contain wisdom sayings or proverbs, and none contain a miracle, unlike the first and last controversy stories (the healings of the paralytic and the man with the withered hand, respectively). Additionally, the first and last controversy stories involve Jesus, his opponents, and the person being healed. The three central stories include Jesus, his opponents, and his disciples. Finally, and of note for a social-scientific interpretation of the present text in its social and textual contexts, Dewey notes that in the three central stories, Jesus responds to a direct question, rather than taking the initiative (1973:396). In the first and fifth controversy stories there is an element of challenge/riposte between Jesus and the Pharisees; in the first story Jesus issues the challenge (Mark 2:8-9), and in the fifth, the Pharisees challenge Jesus (Mark 2:24). Dewey also notes how the five controversy stories provide the reader with a sense of the growing conflict between Jesus and his opponents:

Along with the chiasmic structure of the five sub-units, there exists also a linear development of hostility in the opponents from silent criticism to the questioning of Jesus' disciples, to the questioning of Jesus himself, to watching him, finally to plotting to destroy him. The opponents are designated in order as the scribes, the scribes of the Pharisees, the Pharisees, and finally the Pharisees with the Herodians. The attack of the opponents becomes increasingly overt in the sequence of stories. This may be a deliberate literary device used to lend a time-sense, a sense of progression, to an otherwise content-structured unit.

(Dewey1973:398)

An interpretation of Jesus' response to the question about fasting must be grounded in the context of these texts, as the authors (particularly Mark) clearly associate this story with other events. The chiasmic structure of the conflict stories in Mark's gospel indicates that there will be some similarities between the interpretation of this pericope and the others in the chiasm. It may be helpful to organize these conflict stories and their most basic interpretations in a visual format.

Conflict	Resolution	Interpretation	Text
Healing of the paralytic	Jesus' healing of the paralytic validates his claim to have the authority to forgive sins	Jesus has authority to forgive sins	Mk 2:1-12
Eating with sinners	Jesus validates his behavior in terms of his mission – he did not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance	Jesus came to call sinners to repentance	Mk 2:15-17
Jesus and his disciples do not fast	Fasting is not appropriate in the presence of the bridegroom – that is, in a time of celebration	Jesus' disciples will fast when he is no longer with them	Mk 2:18-20
Plucking grain on the Sabbath	Jesus validates his disciples' picking of the grain by appealing to David's behavior in 1 Sm 21:1-6, and asserts his	'The Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath (Mk 2:28)'	Mk 2:23-28

	authority over the Sabbath		
Healing of the man with the withered hand on the Sabbath	The Pharisees and Herodians conspire to destroy Jesus	It is lawful to do good on the Sabbath	Mk 3:1-6

Thus, in their most basic interpretations, the first two conflict stories deal with Jesus' relationship to sinners – he has the authority to forgive sins, and his mission is to call sinners to repentance. The last two stories relate to the Sabbath: Jesus claims that he is lord of the Sabbath, that is, that his messianic identity gives him authority over the religious regulations of the Sabbath (and presumably other rituals as well); and that it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath. It is noteworthy that Jesus first asserts his authority (to forgive sin; over the Sabbath), then exercises that authority (seeking out sinners; healing on the Sabbath).

One might observe a linear structure in this organization, in addition to the escalating conflict cited by Dewey, above. There seems to also be a shift in Jesus' emphasis from sinners (that is, by implication, those who are not religiously observant) to those who observe the Sabbath. In the first two stories, Jesus' responses indicate that his mission and authority extend to the forgiveness of sinners, while in the last two stories, Jesus is establishing his relationship to dutiful religious observance, using the Sabbath as a case in point. Between his emphasis on sinners and on observant Jews, he answers a question about fasting with a reference to himself as the bridegroom at a wedding celebration, and compares his disciples to the celebrants at the wedding. Just as it would be inappropriate to fast at a wedding, an occasion when feasting would be expected, so it would be inappropriate to fast in the presence of the Messiah. Mark clearly intends to associate the messianic presence of Jesus with both sinners and with observant Jews in this chiasm.

Dewey describes the content of Mk 2:18-22 as having three distinct elements:

C itself consists of three separate units: vss. 18-19, a controversy apophthegm about fasting, with Jesus' response, in effect that it was a time for joy, not fasting; vs. 20, the christological allegorization of the "bridegroom" and the justification of the fasting practice of the early church; and vss. 21-22, two apparently unattached

sayings on the incompatibility of the old and new, which in their present context justify the new over against the old. The restatement of the apothegm counter-question, “Can the sons of the bridechamber fast while the bridegroom is with them?” into the statement, “As long as they have the bridegroom with them they are not able to fast” (2:19), may have been done in order to produce a double saying to balance the two new-old sayings, with vs. 20, the allusion to Jesus' death, in between. The pattern: double saying, allusion to the crucifixion, double saying, in itself seems quite probable. But then the whole of vs. 18, contrasting the fasting practices of the disciples of John and of the Pharisees with the disciples of Jesus, would balance the phrase “new wine in new skins” (vs. 22c). The phrase, however, is not parallel in form to vs. 18 and is also of doubtful textual validity. Story C does not appear to be, as one might like, a precise chiasmic structure within itself, set within the larger chiasmic structure.

(Dewey1973:397-398)

4.2.6.2 A social-scientific interpretation

Interpreting this text from a social-scientific perspective brings several important elements of the story into focus. First, it is significant that this is not an instance of challenge/riposte, as happens quite often between Jesus and his opponents in the gospels. As discussed in Chapter 2, the social game of challenge/riposte was played to gain the social currency of honor, and had clearly defined rules, with a somewhat predictable set of outcomes: one party gains honor from the other. Though Mark's gospel is replete with examples of challenge and riposte, this does not appear to be one of them. As Tolbert explains:

The debate is set up by the narrator's statement that the disciples of John and the Pharisees were fasting. “They” come to Jesus and ask him why his disciples do not fast (v 18). Those asking the question are designated only by the verb forms, but given the immediately preceding story we have grounds for presuming them to be those people, including “tax collectors and sinners,” who are following him. If that suggestion has merit, it would additionally explain why Jesus' response to the question takes the less rhetorically effective route of using examples rather than enthymemes: this is a question from friends, not a controversy with opponents.

(Tolbert 1996:205)

The fact that Jesus is not responding to a challenge, but to a sincere question, certainly affects how his response is interpreted. Jesus' answer is not an attempt to gain honor from an audience in response to a challenge, but is a rather straightforward answer to a question. If the party asking the question is indeed the tax collectors and sinners, and if

Jesus' mission, as he stated in Mk 2:17, to call sinners, then his answer is intended to establish his messianic identity, thus drawing sinners to himself, rather than an attempt to gain honor or to dishonor an opponent.

Jesus uses three examples from the daily life of his audience, as he speaks about fasting in the context of the new covenant which his messianic identity establishes: feasting at a wedding, repairing clothing, and preserving wine. The basic implication of each of these analogies is that the old order is being fulfilled, and that Jesus is inaugurating a new order. Fasting is not appropriate in the presence of the Messiah, for the Messiah fulfills the longing and the hope of Israel; many of the reasons for fasting expressed in the Old Testament have been fulfilled in the person of Christ. Tolbert explains:

The example of the bridegroom (vv 19-20) sets the stage for the other two "common sense" examples about the perils of mixing old and new.... When the bridegroom and the wedding guests are together toasting the fruitfulness of the union, fasting would be an act of unthinkable rudeness. But after the bridegroom leaves and the celebration has ended, then fasting, penance, purification are all appropriate actions. Since the example is presented as a response to the different actions of the Pharisees and the disciples of Jesus, the implication is clearly that Jesus' disciples, with Jesus now with them, live in a period of celebration during which fasting is completely unsuitable. When Jesus leaves them, then fasting and penance are proper actions (indeed, given the disciples' shameful behavior later during Jesus' trial and crucifixion, fasting and penance are the least they ought to do).

(Tolbert 1996:206)

Jesus' association of fasting with a new, unshrunk patch and an old, brittle wineskin makes the point that a religious practice which is applied without thought to its context is destructive – specifically applied to fasting, one may surmise that fasting as a sign of mourning, as in traditional Judaism (see Chapter 3) in the presence of the Messiah is self-destructive because it prevents one from acknowledging and celebrating his messianic identity. Such a view may receive credence from Matthew's gospel, which indicates that near the end of his life (after the events depicted in Mk 2), John sent word to Jesus to ask if he was truly the Messiah, or if he and his disciples should look for another. John and his disciples were faithful to fast, but they did not clearly see, nor

celebrate, the significance of Jesus as the Messiah. Tolbert expands on the significance of context for religious practices:

In addition to this implication for the specific situation of Jesus' disciples, the example also suggests a more general principle about religious practice: the particular circumstances human beings find themselves in determine what ritual actions are suitable at that particular time. In other words, religious practice is contingent, not self-sufficient.... In Jesus' paradigmatic response, traditional religious practices like fasting may not necessarily be eliminated but their value is profoundly restricted to "traditional" circumstances; when circumstances change, new rituals must be found. Thus, rituals and traditions are not, from Jesus' perspective, absolute goods in themselves, having an intrinsic merit of their own ordained by God; instead, they are always defined by the special needs of people in every particular situation. To ignore the deeply contingent nature of religious practice is both foolish and ultimately destructive.

(Tolbert 1996:206)

Bultmann agrees, in principle at least, with the above interpretation, writing:

His answer to the question about fasting, Mk. 2:19, does not reject fasting on principle, but means that in the dawning of messianic joy the mourning custom of fasting (which in itself is not opposed) does not make sense. The original meaning of the sayings about the new patch on an old garment and new wine in old skins (Mk. 2:21f.) is no longer clearly discernible. It may have intended some such meaning as this, that in the messianic period the old mourning customs have become meaningless.

(Bultmann 1951:16-17)

It is possible to read too much into Jesus' response here. Mitchell, for example, writes:

An important observation is that Jesus and His disciples did not conform to the common customs of traditional Judaism. Their conduct reveals a clear-cut breach with existing religious practice. This one issue concerning fasting brought into focus the whole question of Jesus' attitude toward Jewish tradition.

(Mitchell 1990:460-461)

To say that Jesus made a 'clear-cut breach with existing religious practice' is an overstatement. The gospels depict Jesus as being faithful in attendance at the temple and in local synagogues (the fifth conflict story, in Mk 3:1-6, finds Jesus attending a synagogue on the Sabbath), and as paying the temple tax (Mt 17:24-27), for example. Jesus simply states in this text that fasting is not appropriate in the presence of the

Messiah, and that the time will come when his followers will fast (i.e., when he is no longer with them). His enigmatic words about patches and wineskins indicate a change in religious paradigms, but not that he or his disciples should sever all ties to traditional Judaism. Clearly his immediate followers did not understand him to mean this either, as Luke's account of their behavior following Jesus' death depicts their participation in temple and synagogue worship. Acts 3:1, for example, has Peter and John going up to the temple at the hour of prayer. Had Peter and John interpreted Jesus words as Mitchell seems to, it is unlikely they would participate in traditional Jewish worship in the temple.

It is also noteworthy that Jesus and his disciples refrained from fasting at a time when it may have been socially expected that they do so. Both the Pharisees and John and his disciples were fasting at this time, so, although a specific context (such as the Day of Atonement) is not provided, the interpreter may surmise that this was a traditional fast day. The social norm of collectivism is at work here – Jewish society did not tolerate individuality to any great extent. Even John, the nonconformist, is fasting. Jesus and his disciples demonstrate individuality in this instance – they do not fast with the collective. When questioned about this, Jesus' response indicates that theological reasons for not fasting override the collective motivation to fast. Jesus assumes that his followers will collectively fast after his death, in anticipation of his return; however, their religious observance is not merely rote; they will fast or refrain from fasting for specific purposes.

4.2.6.3 Conclusions

What, then, are the implications of this pericope for formulating a New Testament theology of fasting? The first implication is clear from Jesus' own words: fasting is not an appropriate response to his messianic presence, but that a time will come when fasting is appropriate. Many Christians interpret that time as the present – the age between the ascension and the second coming, when Jesus is physically absent from his disciples:

Jesus reminds them that the Messianic age is a continual wedding banquet. In this regard the NT combines various OT themes of the banquet symbol: the paschal or covenant banquet (Ex 12; 24:11; Lk 22:29f.); the nuptial meal (Ct 5:1; Ap 19:9); the eschatological feast (Is 55:1f.; 65:11-13; Ap 3:20; 19:9; Lk 22:29).... By his continual insistence that the disciple must carry his cross after Jesus, Luke places the present age of the Church within this time of mourning. Although full eschatological glory came with Jesus' ascension, it is not yet fully experienced by the Church. The early Church fasted (Acts 13:2f.; 14:22; *Didache* 8).

(Brown *et al.* 1968:134)

Jesus did not command his disciples to fast, but in the text under examination, he states that in the future, his disciples would engage in fasting. As Mitchell writes, 'The words 'then they will fast' are a prediction, not a command. Nowhere does the New Testament command fasting' (Mitchell 1990:462).

Additionally, the significance attached to fasting in the old order may change according to the context in which the ritual or discipline is practiced. It is possible that Christian fasting in the age of the church takes on a meaning different from its antecedents in the Old Testament, yet no inconsistency is implied.

Thus, a theology of fasting in the New Testament must take into account the following conclusions from this text:

- Jesus did not command his disciples to fast, but predicted that they would do so. Jesus seems to have seen fasting as a normative practice for his disciples in his absence.
- Jesus did not sever all ties to traditional Judaism, but he did allow that the significance of certain aspects of Judaism (fasting, the Sabbath) were subject to reinterpretation in light of his messianic arrival.
- Fasting in this context is presented in a chiasm alongside Jesus' authority and mission to forgive sinners, and his authority over the Sabbath day. Fasting is not separated from social and evangelistic emphases, on the one hand, and liturgical ones, on the other.

4.2.7 Fasting and self-righteousness- Luke 18:9-14

And He also told this parable to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt: Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: "God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get." But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, "God, be merciful to me, the sinner!" "I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted."

(Lk 18:9-14)

This passage in Luke 18 portrays Jesus presenting a parable 'to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt' (Lk 18:9). The immediate context does not identify Jesus' audience further, but one may surmise from the content of the parable that perhaps Pharisees were the intended audience. In this parable, Jesus sets up two caricatures: a Pharisee and a tax collector. One is redeemed, and the other is not. This Section will identify the role of fasting in this parable, and will interpret the significance of the parable for a New Testament theology of fasting.

Fasting is not a prominent feature of this parable. It is mentioned only once, in verse 12, in which the Pharisee dutifully reports that he fasts twice a week. The parable is not about fasting *per se*, but rather, as Luke explains about the dangers of trusting in one's own righteousness to be justified. Jesus' emphasis in this text is not on fasting, but on the Pharisee's reliance on his fasting to produce merit. Fasting is presented, alongside tithing as evidence of the Pharisee's moral and spiritual uprightness. Fasting, in this case, is presented as evidence of the man's spiritual condition, rather than as an action which produces a certain result, or expects a specific response from God. The immediate question of relevance to this study is whether Jesus leads his audience to believe that fasting is an act of merit that leads to justification before God (or if fasting is indicative of a spiritual condition which leads to justification); the question is whether fasting produces, or constitutes, merit. As Bergant and Karris write: 'The debate over

faith and works is already engaged here. Jesus himself draws the shocking conclusion from the parable: the observant Pharisee goes home unjustified, the sinful tax collector is justified. The reversal maxim concludes the story' (Bergant & Karris 1989:968).

4.2.7.1 Textual context

A proper interpretation of this parable will place it into its Lukan context. As Doran explains, the context of this parable leads the reader to associate it with other events, parables, and discourses which emphasize the grace of God:

Luke has Jesus tell this parable during his journey to Jerusalem, after the third mention of Jerusalem as his destination (17:11) and before his entrance into Jericho (18:35). Within this section fall the healing of the ten lepers (17:11-19), the description of the coming of God's kingdom (17:20-37), the parable of the dishonest judge (18:1-8), the blessing of little children (18:15-17), the story of the rich magistrate (18:18-30), and the third announcement of the passion of the Son of Man (18:31-34). In these stories, the unexpected happens: It is the Samaritan, the foreigner, who returns to thank Jesus for his healing and who is given salvation; little children become models of behavior; it is not the wealthy magistrate but Jesus' poor followers who will enter the kingdom of heaven; the Son of Man has to be mocked and put to death before he can come in triumph. In these stories are hints of capriciousness: Why is one taken, another left (17:34-35)? Why are some chosen, others not (18:7)? Is there any ground for the choice? The Samaritan praises God, and his faith saves him (17:15-16, 19); the chosen ones call out to God persistently for vindication (18:7); the disciples leave all (18:29-30). But those who seek to keep their lives for themselves will lose their lives (17:33). The criterion thus seems to be that one must not consider one's life to be self-contained, but must recognize that God disposes. The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector fits nicely within this general theme: not reliance on self but dependence on God's graciousness.

(Doran 2007:270)

Indeed, in its immediate context in Luke 18, it is found between the parable of the unjust judge (Lk 18:1-8) and the story of the rich young ruler (Lk 18:18-27), which emphasize God's gracious response to faith on the part of his people. Just as he has presented caricatures in the unjust judge and the pesky widow, he presents caricatures of the Pharisee and the tax collector in this parable. Rather than reading the characters in this parable as representative of actual individuals, it makes sense to read them as examples of hyperbole; Jesus is making a point, rather than simply providing an account of events at a prayer service. Just as he uses hyperbole in responding to the rich young ruler (Lk 18:25), he uses hyperbole here in his depiction of the Pharisee.

Downing refers to Jesus' parable here as 'subversive' (Downing 1992:96), and argues that Jesus' original audience would have heard it as such.

4.2.7.2 Social context

For the purpose of this study, the character in the parable who merits attention is the Pharisee, for it is he who is depicted as regularly practicing fasting, and as making assumptions about the significance of his fasting for his spirituality. Doran summarizes the role of Pharisees in Luke-Acts:

The characterization of the Pharisees in Luke-Acts is much more complex. They challenge Jesus and his lifestyle from their very first appearance at the healing of a paralytic (5:17-26). They complain about his consorting with tax collectors and sinners (5:30; 7:39; 15:2), fault his behavior (6:1-11; 19:39), and lie in wait to trick him (11:53-54; 14:1-3). Jesus himself has harsh words for the Pharisees (11:38-44; 16:14-15). Yet Jesus is constantly portrayed as dining with Pharisees (7:30; 11:37); he is asked questions by Pharisees (17:20); and Pharisees warn him about the threats of Herod (13:31). Gamaliel, the Pharisee, argues that the apostles should not be killed (Acts 5:34-39), and there are Pharisees who join the Jesus movement (Acts 15:5), including Paul (Acts 26:5). Pharisees side with Paul against the Sadducees at this trial (Acts 23:6-9). There is thus a tension in the characterization of the Pharisees in Luke's work: some are good, some bad. When Jesus therefore identifies one of the characters in the story as a Pharisee, he is not automatically a bad character. What makes him bad is his self-aggrandizement, and I surmise that many Pharisees would have agreed with this assessment. Not all Pharisees thought that they were the upright ones and everyone else was to be despised, as noted above.

(Doran 2007:269)

Thus, the Pharisee is in the parable to represent a specific spiritual perspective. Just as not all priests and Levites would leave a wounded man to die on the side of the road, and not every Samaritan would take responsibility for the wounded man's care (Lk 10:30-37), not every Pharisee would have trusted in his own righteousness and viewed others with contempt. Such a view of the Pharisees is overly simplistic, and does not take into account the complexity of the Pharisees as a politico-religious movement, or the intricacies of individual personality and spirituality. This Pharisee should be seen as a caricature invented to make a specific point, rather than an attempt to depict typical Pharisaism.

The Pharisees were concerned with obedience to the laws of Yahweh, as was Jesus, though the risk of forsaking the spirit of the law for mere adherence to the letter of it was always present. Holmgren explains

The Pharisee in the parable typifies (in the mind of Luke) one for whom sacred confession has become a means of exalting self and demeaning others. With his parable, the Lukan Jesus joins with the prophets and rabbis in condemning such posturing, and the story concludes with a threat directed at those who exalt themselves.

(Holmgren 1994:258)

To the modern, Western reader, the Pharisee's speech is the height of arrogance and ostentation: to stand publically in a church service and verbally attest to one's own righteousness in comparison with others present would be scorned. Such behavior would most likely have been anathema (outside a certain context) in first-century Judaism as well – thus, the caricature Jesus is presenting. The inclusion of such behavior in the parable is a cultural cue to Jesus' audience that a larger point is being made through the use of hyperbole.

There was a context in which such self-attestation would have been appropriate, however, as Holmgren explains:

It seems clear that both the Pharisees and Jesus were intent on preserving the integrity and health of the covenant community. Still, it also appears that the Pharisees were more traditional in their outlook than was Jesus. The truth they stressed was that of which Psalm 1 speaks: One must be careful in relating to those whose lifestyle opposes and harms the flow of life in the torah community lest the community's own healthfulness be placed in jeopardy. The Pharisees stood within a tradition that called upon Jews to give unambiguous testimony of their commitment to the torah-gift that God had given them. It is against this background that we can understand some basic concerns of the Pharisaic tradition.

(Holmgren 1994:256)

Deuteronomy 26:1-15 contains formulaic expressions of obedience and faithfulness which the Jews were to recite before the priest when bringing an offering. The recital includes both expressions of the faithfulness of God (Dt 26:7-9) and of the obedience of the one reciting the prayer (Dt 26:10, 13-14). It ends with a prayer for God's blessing (Dt

26:15). As in the parable in Luke 18:9-14, the affirmation of one's obedience is connected to the act of tithing. Several differences exist between the liturgy in Deuteronomy 26 and that presented by the Pharisee in this parable. In Deuteronomy, only specific actions are named; that is the one praying recites what he or she has done or has not done, whereas Jesus' Pharisee begins by asserting his own unique, meritorious character ('I am not like other people'), and cites his fasting and tithing as evidence of this character. The liturgy in Deuteronomy ends with a prayer for God's grace and justification; the Pharisee in the parable assumes himself to be justified. Jesus' audience may have recognized the Pharisee's oratory as a parody of the Deuteronomic liturgy, intended to further emphasize Jesus' point about trusting in one's own righteousness.

The Pharisee's speech may illustrate one of the primary problems of Pharisaism in Jesus' day:

In Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, however, the Pharisee's religiosity illustrates the danger of a liturgy like that recorded in Deuteronomy 26: Laws are emphasized, the covenant relationship is forgotten, and legalism emerges to shape religious faith into a form that is alien to its beginnings.

(Holmgren 1994:259)

Doran expands on the Pharisee's prayer as parody:

In fact, when looked at closely, the prayer of the Pharisee in the parable can be seen as a parody of the Qumran and rabbinic prayers. Although the latter thank God for graciously placing them by moral luck in the covenant, the former stresses his own moral achievement—*he* is not a predator, a wrongdoer, and an adulterer. The same can be said for his claims that he tithes all that he acquires, and that he fasts twice a week. Some passages in the Mishnah recommend that one tithe even the foodstuffs that one buys (*m. Maas.* 2.1), and scholars have pointed to these passages. But tithing applies only to food and drink, not to everything one acquires, such as a house, clothes, and so on. The Pharisee's expression is over the top. As for fasting, it is recommended in times of personal or communal disaster. But the constant practice of fasting would be a way of forming identity. Just as eating together is a sign of community, so not eating is also a means of self-identification. Here the Pharisee is dissociating himself from the community. Is he choosing to identify himself as a leader of the community, for the Mishnah (*m. Taan.* 1.4) recommends that, in times of drought, important members of the community should fast three days? Is the Pharisee's perpetual fasting an attempt to exalt himself? In sum, the Pharisee's prayer is a caricature and might have brought a smile even to

the faces of real Pharisee bystanders. They might themselves have encountered such priggish behavior.

(Doran 2007:267; emphasis in the original)

The Pharisee in the parable has clearly made the leap from faith to works as the basis of justification; from grace to law keeping as the means of gaining favor with God, and this is precisely the point Jesus is making in his parables – trusting in one’s own merit does not lead to justification with God. It is not out of the norm for prayer and morality to be connected to one another, as Blake explains:

One characteristic of Judaism, also accepted from the beginning by Christianity, was that prayer and morality are always to be interrelated, bound together, interdependent. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, except for some short lived aberrations, there has never been a practice of prayer that was unrelated to morality.

(Blake 1972:133)

However, for personal morality, as opposed to divine mercy, to be the basis of prayer, as depicted here, would be offensive to Jesus’ Jewish audience; thus, the use of hyperbole to make his point about spiritual self-reliance. As Holmgren writes:

In Jesus’ parable in Luke, the same contrast of extremes occurs, namely, the comparison between the very religious Pharisee and the very sinful tax collector. We are dealing here with hyperbole. Luke uses broad, exaggerated word-strokes to make the story unambiguously clear: Prideful performance of one’s religious obligations, combined with contempt for others, is no way to be righteous before God.

(Holmgren 1994:253)

Downing proposes that the key to the interpretation of this parable is that Jesus is presenting caricatures to make his point about justification:

My suggestion, then, is that we agree to take the parable as presenting us with twin caricatures. Both have an initial plausibility, sufficient for the allusions to register. But then the ambiguity of each dawns on us, for the prayer of the pious and respectable Pharisee is as self-absorbed as is the prayer of the despised toll-collector. The hearer is then left puzzling, left to decide for herself or himself how to respond. Both characters are sure that God’s welcome is restricted and conditional, and both are sure God holds public offenders at arm’s length. So both are wrong? Thus the intention of the narrative, shorn of its frame, must be to suggest that the second prayer is as much a parody in its own way as is the first.

The ambiguity is deliberate. The hope is we may prefer Jesus' offer of God's quite unconditional welcome, and respond appropriately.

(Downing 1992:98)

4.2.7.3 Exclusivity

Jesus' parable presents an exclusive picture of redemption – not everyone who expects to be justified, is justified. Two men went to the temple to pray – contrast is presented, not unlike the case of the two sons in Luke's parable in Luke 15:11-32. As in this prior parable, the audience is surprised by the grace of God in justifying the sinner. Though a similar contrast is presented in the two parables, the parable of the prodigal son does not contain the exclusivity of the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. The father in the previous parable receives the prodigal son home, but does not reject the son who stayed home; indeed in Luke 15:31, the father affirms that the son has always been with him, and that he shares in all the father's possessions. However, Jesus clearly states that the tax collector went home justified, and that the Pharisee did not (Lk 18:14). In this respect, this parable is similar to the parable of Lazarus and the rich man in Luke 16:19-31, in which two men are compared. Both die; the rich man goes to Hades, while Lazarus, the beggar, goes to the bosom of Abraham (Lk 16:22-23). The paradigm of exclusivity is similar between this parable and the one under consideration – one man is justified before God, and the other is rejected. This paradigm of exclusivity would have been familiar to Jesus' Jewish audience, being found as far back in the Old Testament as the accounts of Cain and Abel (Gn 4), Jacob and Esau (Gn 25), and Saul and David (1 Sm 13-18), for example. Kodell notes that parallels are also to be found in the events immediately following this parable: the blessing of the children (Lk 18:15-17) and the rich young ruler (Lk 18:18-25): 'Again, the technique is that of exemplary pairs. The Pharisee and the tax collector of vv 9-14 are paralleled with the rich ruler and the children of vv 15-25' (Kodell 1987:423). The children are presented as a model for entering the kingdom of God, while the rich young ruler went away sorrowful.

Not all scholars favor this exclusive interpretation. Doran, for example, writes:

[O]ne has to decide whether the comparative form is to be read as exclusive or as properly comparative. As far as I can see, the only factor in the context that has led interpreters to choose an exclusive meaning is a disinclination to say that a Pharisee is upright/justified (δεδικαιωμένος).

(Doran 2007:262)

It seems that Jesus goes beyond a passive disinclination to acknowledge the justification of the Pharisee, however. He makes a clear contrast in Luke 18:14 – ‘this one ... rather than the other...’. Jesus is not, in this parable, comparing ways to be justified – he is warning those who trust in themselves and their religious acts of merit, rather than the grace of God (Lk 18:9, 14).

Doran favors a scaled, comparative interpretation, rather than exclusive one. He rightly points out that both moral actions and an attitude of repentance are crucial in Judaism:

In these two prayers, then, are contrasted two emphases, one of moral achievement, the other of begging for pardon. In this agonistic story, an over-emphasis on moral effort is shown to be not as important as repentance for sins. Moral effort and repentance are found linked throughout Jewish tradition.

(Doran 2007:268)

Holmgren notes that both grace and works are necessary for an authentic spirituality:

The two themes of grace (vs. 1-11) and action-response (vs. 12-15) must both find emphasis in the faith community if we are to avoid the “I” religiosity of the Pharisee or the deprecatory piety of the tax collector. Neither image is attractive; both lack authenticity.

(Holmgren 1994:260)

Again, reading this parable, it does not appear that Jesus is teaching that repentance is more important than moral effort, but that self-righteous moral effort does not lead to justification. It is significant to note that there is no mention in this parable of moral effort combined with a repentant spirit, though this is certainly the most desirable spiritual condition, both for Jews and for Christians. To that extent, this parable teaches simply that moral effort devoid of repentance does not lead to justification; it goes no further.

This distinction between repentance, on the one hand, and moral effort devoid of repentance, on the other, would have been a familiar one to Jesus' audience. Blake notes:

In any case, these two religious men, about whom Jesus told his short story, came out of a tradition which took it for granted that when you pray it is not a substitute for right living but ought to be its inspiration, its blessing, and a help to some discrimination between right and wrong.

(Blake 1972:133)

Though Doran sees this parable as comparative rather than exclusive, he correctly notes that the distinction between the two men gets to the point of Jesus' story:

When writing the story, Luke will use the comparative format he has used elsewhere (Luke 13:2,4). More important, one rightly expects from the opening of the story ("Two men ... one ... the other") that the conclusion will refer to both characters. Some of Jesus' parables do end without a total resolution, as Friedrichsen holds, but here the resolution is part and parcel of the story itself.

(Doran 2007:263)

The contrast between the two men is evident in the language Luke uses to describe them. Kodell points out some key lexical features of this parable:

The word *dikaioi* (v 9) prepares for *dedikaiōmenos* (v 14), but in an ironic sense, because true righteousness cannot be accompanied by contempt for others. The word *exouthenountas* (v 9) relates to the attitude of the disciples and the Samaritans (9:49,54-55; 18:15). The word *statheis* (v 11), found only in Luke-Acts, probably implies here a pompous attitude; *hestōs* (v 13), referring to position rather than posture, implies receptive lowliness.

(Kodell1987:424)

Though the interpretation of the parable seems straightforward, Jesus does offer an explanation in Luke 18:14. Downing notes that this explanation may be explained by the fact that the parable does not provide a satisfactory conclusion for Jesus' audience:

In 18:9-14 as it stands we have thus seventy-six words of narrative and a further forty-one of explanatory gloss. It must then be allowed that it would be very strange indeed for an author to compose and deploy a parabolic narrative that he or she saw as so inadequate on its own for its intended purpose as to need more than half as many extra words as were used for the narrative itself than to resolve its ambiguity

and make it say what the narrator meant. It does look very much more as if Luke received from the tradition a story of two people praying, where (irrespective of original intention) the second example met with his strong approval. Yet he was also sufficiently aware of contemporary discussions of prayer to realize that as it stood many might on reflection find both men equally obtuse.

(Downing 1992:97)

Some parables seem to be more satisfying than others. The parable immediately preceding the one under consideration, for example, offers such satisfaction. A corrupt judge earns the scorn of Jesus' audience (he has dishonored himself with corruption), while the widow is ascribed honor for her persistence despite her poverty (Lk 18:1-8). As such, this parable provides a clear-cut villain and a corresponding hero. The audience goes away satisfied that God's justice has been meted out in a way that conforms to their theological, cultural, and social norms. The present parable, however, offers little satisfaction because neither man is clearly a hero or a villain. Downing notes that many such 'unsatisfying' parables are to be found in Luke:

We may well be reluctant to admit a parable that makes no positive point, robs us of an appealingly guilt-ridden figure to admire and to emulate. We expect to be given exemplary heroes. We find one in the Good Samaritan, one or even two in the Prodigal, and so on. But, as we know from the Unjust Steward, we may be wrong always to expect such; and perhaps the usurious master and his favored servants in the Pounds/Talents are as wrong as the disgraced one; perhaps even the king and his lackeys who return to vengefulness are as wrong as the Unforgiving Servant; and what are we to make of the disastrous behavior of the man who let out his vineyard? On the proposal advanced here we just gain one more disquieting parable that subverts our expectations.

(Downing 1992:98-99)

What, then might this parable teach about Jesus' view of fasting in relation to justification? Perhaps simply that fasting, as well as tithing, are not necessarily indicators of a spiritual condition that is pleasing to God. The Pharisee fasts, yet he is rejected. This rejection is not based on his fasting, but on his trust in his own righteousness on the basis of his moral endeavors, including fasting. Two important omissions in this parable must be taken into account when incorporating this text into a New Testament theology of fasting: first, that Jesus neither praises nor condemns fasting here. He simply presents fasting, along with tithing, as examples of the behavior

of a caricature of self-righteousness. Second, Jesus does not discuss God's acceptance or rejection of a believer who both fasts and repents. He does not discuss what may be called 'righteous fasting' – fasting that is truly part of a pious, repentant life. This is the ideal of Christian fasting, but is not discussed in this parable. There are no positive examples of holy living in this parable; simply a portrait of a self-righteous, self-serving Pharisee and a (temporarily) repentant tax collector – neither man is presented as a model of piety. In many ways, Jesus rejects such simplistic portrayals of religious life, as Downing notes:

If we choose to reject the words and actions of the second figure as well as those of the first, we find ourselves affirming the kind of approach to God that Jesus in the tradition elsewhere teaches. By the criterion of coherence it seems to have as good a claim as any other to be Jesus' own.

(Downing 1992:99)

4.2.7.4 Vicarious fasting: Friedrichson's interpretation

One other interpretation of fasting in this text merits consideration: that of Friedrichson, who sees the Pharisee's moral endeavors as justifying not himself, but others. Perhaps, according to Friedrichson, the Pharisee fasted vicariously, and the merit produced affected the tax collector. Friedrichson's theory deserves mention because he is one of the very few commentators who assign a primary role to the importance of fasting in this text. Perhaps Friedrichson has gone further than Luke in this regard; if fasting is indeed simply an example of exaggerated piety attributed to a caricature of self-righteousness, then it is not necessary to attempt to extrapolate further significance. Friedrichson, however, interprets the parable differently. His interpretation will be explained below. Following this explanation, reasons for preferring the interpretation above will be given.

Friedrichson takes Jesus' depiction of the Pharisee's behavior quite literally, rather than as a caricature. The Pharisee's fasting and tithing, for Friedrichson, are not simply examples of moral and spiritual behavior intended to verify the Pharisee's claims to be more righteous than others, but carry a significance of their own:

The Pharisee continues his thanksgiving by enumerating the religious acts that he is able to do: νηστεύω δια του σαββάτου, ἀποδεκατῶ πάντα ὅσα κτώμαι (v. 12, “I fast twice a week, and I pay tithes on my whole income”). In both of these acts the Pharisee goes above and beyond what is required. With respect to the Torah, fasting was required only on the Day of Atonement (Lev 16:29-34; 23:27-32; Num 29:7-11). By the first century CE., however, Purim and other national holidays included fasting. Moreover, fasting was seen as a virtuous, meritorious deed for the purposes of penance, mourning, remorse; it was also considered preparation for service, for communing with God, and even for the Messiah.

(Friedrichson 2005:110)

Fitzmyer points out that this text is distinctive in its reference to fasting twice a week:

This passage is the earliest attestation of the custom of the Jews fasting twice a week. *Didi* 8:1 instructs Christians that they are not to fast “with the hypocrites” on the second and fifth days of the week, but on the fourth day and on the parasceve (= day of preparation for the Sabbath)... Two days not contiguous with the Sabbath and themselves as far apart as possible, hence Monday and Thursday.

(Fitzmeyer1985:1187)

Friedrichson concludes that the Pharisee’s bi-weekly fasting is not hyperbole on Jesus’ part, but an indication of the Pharisee’s concern for his community – that he fasted for others who could not, or would not, fast:

Thus, not only is this Pharisee conscientious about tithing (and fasting), but he also seems to have the weightier matters of the law (see, as noted above, Luke 11:42//Matt 23:23) in mind by his willingness to go above and beyond what is required for the sake of those who could not fulfill their duty.

(Friedrichson 2005:111)

Thus, for Friedrichson, the Pharisee’s fasting was vicarious – it was done not for his benefit, but for others. What is the basis for such an interpretation? For Friedrichson, it is found in the temple liturgy. Under the law, justification required a sacrifice, and in this text, no sacrifice is mentioned. A man has gone home justified on the basis of his prayer alone, with no sacrifice offered. Friedrichson concludes that the fasting and tithing of the Pharisee is, in fact, the sacrifice which justified the tax collector:

With the observation that no explicit reference to sacrifice had been made by the storyteller, hearers may have continued to struggle to explain how it could be that the tax collector went down from the temple justified. Might a hearer suggest that the

tax collector went down justified because he had benefited from the vicarious virtue of the Pharisee's fasting and tithing? What else does the storyteller offer his hearers? Unquestionably it is God who had effected the justifying, as the perfect passive participle *δεδικαιωμένος* indicates.

(Friedrichson 2005:117)

Friedrichson's theory is an interesting one, and would have significant import for a New Testament theology of fasting, if indeed a serious reading of the text supported such an interpretation. However, several reasons exist to reject Friedrichson's interpretation in favor of the one articulated above. The first reason strikes at the center of Friedrichson's theory – that the temple liturgy required a sacrifice in order for justification to take place. While there was indeed a sacrificial system in place, not every visit to the temple required a sacrifice. The most natural reading of the parable points to the Tamid, or afternoon prayer service, as Hamm indicates: 'It is plausible, then, that the implied author expects the reader to assume that the setting within the parable is that most common occasion of temple prayer, the afternoon Tamid service' (Hamm 2003:223; see also Bailey (1983:2.145). If this is the case, the Friedrichson's argument is undermined. He writes:

Nevertheless, in the context of the temple, that divine action is normally connected with the sacrifice, so without explicit mention of the temple sacrifice, it does not seem unreasonable to propose that the original hearers would have searched for something with which to replace the sacrifice. Given that the storyteller does explicitly mention the Pharisee's righteousness, fasting, and tithing, all of which go above and beyond, perhaps some hearers may have connected these with God's justification of the tax collector. Although it is difficult to find contemporary texts to support this connection, that Exod 30:16 already connects the payment of the temple tax with atonement seems to allow the suggestion of a similar understanding of the tithing, which also supported the temple. Moreover, that the Pharisee tithes *πάντα ὅσα κτώμαι* appears to indicate a concern not only for himself, but also for those who did not or could not pay their tithes.

(Friedrichson 2005:117)

A sacrifice would not have been required at a daily prayer service, but only on specific occasions. Friedrichson's theory is based on an assumption about the possible reaction of some members of the original audience of the parable: 'So again, in the absence of the temple sacrifice and in the face of the Pharisee's tithing and fasting, some original hearers may have connected the latter with the tax collector having been made "upright

in the sight of God” by God’ (Friedrichson 2005:117). However, this assumption is not warranted, as a sacrifice would not have been required at a Tamid service. Additionally, three problems arise when basing one’s interpretation on assumptions about the understanding of the original audience. The first is that often the assumptions amount to no more than wild guesses. Did Jesus’ audience interpret his parable as teaching that the vicarious fasting and tithing of the Pharisee justified the tax collector? We don’t know. Could another scholar produce another assumption? Certainly. Such assumptions often constitute eisegesis – reading into the text, rather than out of the text, a meaning which may not be present.

The second problem is that interpretations such as Friedrichson offers do not take into account the actual text. In this instance, Luke has provided a key to interpreting the parable at the very beginning: the parable was told to those who ‘trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt’ (Lk 18:9). The Pharisee’s prayer indicates such contempt for others, such as the tax collector, who is singled out in the prayer (Lk 18:11). To assume that a man who holds others in such contempt is actually fasting and tithing vicariously and sacrificially on their behalf is quite a leap. All evidence in the text indicates that the Pharisee is depicted as confident in his own righteousness based on his actions, but no indication is given of his concern for the righteousness of others.

The third problem is that the meaning of the parable is decided by the narrator, not the audience. Is it possible that some members of Jesus’ audience interpreted this parable along the lines that Friedrichson portrays? Certainly it is possible that some members of any audience may misunderstand any discourse, but this misunderstanding does not give a new, valid meaning to the discourse. A responsible hermeneutic attempts to discern the intended message of the original author to the original audience in their shared social, cultural, and religious contexts. Friedrichson’s interpretation is not based on what Luke writes explicitly, but on what some audience members may have inferred. Such a hermeneutic is subjective at best. This may be illustrated in Friedrichson’s own words:

If any of Jesus' hearers made such a connection it would be hard to overestimate the shock, dismay, and perhaps even anger of the original audience. How else would a pious Pharisee react upon hearing that his fasting and tithing might benefit even a tax collector? How else would other (peasant) hearers, who may have heard themselves reflected or at least implied in the sins listed by the Pharisee, react to this ending? These hearers may even have been hoping that the Pharisee's fasting and tithing might benefit them in their inability to do either. How are they to react upon hearing that the Pharisee's supererogation may benefit, of all people, their nemesis, a tax collector? That is, the one who benefits is precisely the one whose occupation contributes to their inability to pay their tithes (and, perhaps, the temple tax). But so it is with the kingdom of God, according to Jesus' parable. Expectations, even those connected with the temple, do not obligate the kingdom of God.

(Friedrichson 2005:118)

Where is the shock, dismay, and anger of Jesus' audience in the text? It is absent. The gospels record many instances of conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees, yet this parable produces no such conflict. Immediately after the recitation of the parable, a minor conflict does indeed occur – Jesus' disciples rebuke parents who bring their children to Jesus to be blessed, and Jesus in turn rebukes his disciples and blesses the children (Lk 18:15-17). No conflict, shock, dismay, or anger on the part of Jesus' audience is depicted in the text.

This very lack of conflict lends credence to the interpretation of this parable as hyperbole. Had the Pharisees in Jesus' audience viewed the parable as a challenge, social customs of the day would have demanded a response. If they heard the parable as a tongue-in-cheek caricature of ostentatious self-righteousness, they could easily agree with Jesus.

Friedrichson applies his interpretation to contemporary followers of Jesus thus:

Who, then, can be secure in her or his religious observations? What if God refuses to be obliged by any group that makes exclusive claims on the way to salvation? What if all theologies—if the term can be applied—of indulgences, novenas, or First Friday observances are not games the kingdom cares to play? What if whatever benefits any of these practices by an observant person might effect washes over some unobservant one? What if any or all intercessory prayer uttered in worship services or in private help the intercessors' nemeses as much as or even more than those persons in the intercessors' hearts and minds? What if morality, however important, in the end is not the main concern of the kingdom?

(Fridrichson 2005:118)

While reasons have been given to reject Friedrichson's interpretation of the parable, one can agree with him on this point – the purpose of Jesus' parable was indeed to indicate that acts of moral endeavor do not justify the moral actor apart from the grace and favor of God.

4.2.7.5 A social-scientific interpretation

Interpreting this text from a social-scientific critical perspective raises a number of questions. In particular, this parable raises questions concerning honor, and Jesus' perception of it. Though the parable is not seen by the contemporary reader as anything radical, to his audience, Jesus has turned the honor-shame culture in which he was embedded upside down, ascribing honor to a tax-collector, and shame to a Pharisee. This Section will explore some questions of honor and shame which arise from this parable. First, one must ask if the Pharisee's declaration is an honor challenge. It is addressed to God as prayer, but it also provides a direct and explicit comparison to the publican. An honor challenge would demand a riposte from the party challenged, and no riposte is given in the parable. Rather, Jesus, as narrator, provides an interpretive judgment – one man is justified, and the other is not. One might interpret the prayer as an honor challenge to God, who should be expected to reply not with a riposte, but with the ascription of honor to the Pharisee. That is, the Pharisee expects that God will honor him in recognition of his righteousness. Jesus' original audience probably would have interpreted the parable thus. A comparison may be made to a legal case, in which the defendant stands before a judge and declares his innocence, marshalling evidence for his case. The judge would then be expected to honor the defendant by acknowledging his innocence. The Pharisee has kept the law, and even gone above and beyond the minimal requirements – why would he not be honored by God?

Retaining the court analogy, the publican's prayer is tantamount to an admission of guilt; to 'throwing oneself on the mercy of the court.' He admits his sin, and asks for mercy. God, the righteous judge, would be expected to pass judgment on the guilty

sinner. Yet Jesus interprets his own parable, stating that the guilty man is justified, and that the 'just' man is not justified. What can this mean in terms of the social realia of Jesus' world?

Does Jesus clearly understand the social realia of honor and shame in the first-century Mediterranean world? Certainly, he does, and his inversion of his culture is deliberate. Jesus, within his culture, is expressing aspects of a theology of justification. Justification, for Jesus, is not merely a matter of calculation; of conformity to the law. Rather, Jesus' message is one of repentance. The repentant sinner is justified, whereas the Pharisee, who trusts in his own righteousness, sees no reason for repentance. Jesus frequently used such inversions of the concept of honor (the first shall be last, the greatest would serve), to indicate that the culture of the first-century Mediterranean world did not represent God's economy. Jesus presents a theology and a spirituality that transcends his culture, while being expressed in terms familiar to that culture.

Relating this to the subject of fasting, one might find similarities between this text and Matthew 6:16-18. In each text, one finds fasting mentioned in association (explicitly, in Mt 6, or implicitly, here) with the acquisition of honor. In Matthew 6, Jesus warns against using fasting as a means of gaining honor from men, stating that such a purpose invalidates any honor one would have gained from God. Here, the Pharisee fasts and expects honor, but does not receive it. In both texts, God responds favorably to internal piety rather than external acts of religious devotion.

4.2.7.6 Application to a New Testament theology of fasting

Having interpreted the significance of fasting in this parable, attention is now turned to the significance of this text in formulating a New Testament theology of fasting. It is important to go no further in this respect than Luke does; to avoid Friedrichson's error of ascribing more significance to the act of fasting in this text than the original author. In this respect, one can say simply that this parable teaches that fasting, like tithing, does not, in and of itself, lead to righteousness or justification. Fasting, tithing, and prayer are all abused by the Pharisee in the parable for his own self-aggrandizement, and though

fasting, tithing and prayer may all be genuine acts of piety and part of a holy life, the potential exists for these disciplines to be emptied of true religious significance by personal pride.

In addition to the Pharisee trusting in himself that he was righteous on the basis of his moral endeavors, he also viewed others with contempt. The potential exists for a follower of Jesus who practices disciplines such as fasting to look with contempt on others who do not practice these disciplines. Thus, this parable provides a negative example of fasting divorced from true piety. There are both vertical and horizontal dimensions in the text: the Pharisee has trusted in a righteousness he did not possess (vertical), and has looked with contempt on his fellow man (horizontal).

To summarize the import of this text for a New Testament theology of fasting:

- Fasting does not constitute, or produce, moral righteousness apart from a repentant spirit;
- Fasting as an act of self-righteousness may blind one to his or her true spiritual condition – he or she may trust in righteousness that he or she does not possess.
- Fasting as an act of self-righteousness may lead to contempt for one's fellow man who does not fast.
- Fasting is not necessary for justification.

4.2.8 Did Saul fast in Acts 9:8-10?

Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; and leading him by the hand, they brought him into Damascus. And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

(Ac 9:8-9)

The first possible biblical account of fasting outside the gospels (of course Luke-Acts is in the gospel tradition) is found in Acts 9, though it is not clear if religious fasting is depicted in this text. In this text, Luke portrays the conversion of Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus. In Luke's account, the resurrected Christ appears to Saul, rebukes

him for persecuting his followers, and leaves Saul blind. Saul is led by the hand into Damascus, where he waits three days before Ananias, a local Christian, prays for him to receive his sight. During this time, Luke records that Saul 'neither ate nor drank'.

This is one of the most significant New Testament texts, as Gans explains:

If Paul's conversion is recognized as a great moment of Christian history, its theological importance has been less remarked. It is nonetheless the sole revelatory experience of the New Testament that is both historically verifiable and the bearer of a theological intuition of comparable weight to that of Moses on Mount Sinai.

(Gans 1985:99)

Gans goes so far as to mark Saul's conversion as a turning point in the history of Christian revelation:

Paul's conversion is not so much unique as exemplary. The last in the long series of revelations of the resurrected Christ that he modestly summarizes in 1 Corinthians 15, it marks the end of the revelatory period of Christianity, and of Western civilization as a whole. Nor is its relatively minor place in Christian consciousness altogether undeserved. For it signals the exhaustion of the phenomenon of divine revelation as a means of access to anthropological truth.

(Gans 1985:100)

Of course an Evangelical Christian may argue that the revelation of Jesus Christ to John on the island of Patmos is the final divine revelation, but that point notwithstanding, Gans' point has merit – Luke's account of the conversion of Saul the persecutor to Paul the apostle marks a significant New Testament event, to say the least. A significant text – but is this a fasting text? Is it important for formulating a New Testament theology of fasting? Does Saul's abstention from food constitute a fast, and is it normative or exemplary for Christians today? These are several questions of relevance in interpreting Saul's fasting in this text.

The present study will argue that Saul did not undergo a deliberate religious fast, and that this text is not relevant to a New Testament theology of fasting. Some commentators have interpreted this event as a fast, and others have overlooked it altogether. Notable commentators who believe that Paul did indeed engage in a

religious fast include Lechler (n.d.:167), Lenski (1961:358), Marshall (1950:170), Randall (1897), and Smith (1970). Malina and Pilch write: 'In spite of his open eyes, Saul saw nothing. So he fasted for three days, a sign of mourning and self-humiliation in Israelite society' (Malina & Pilch 2008:62). Malina and Pilch seem to take religious fasting for granted, rather than arguing that Paul's actions constitute an intentional religious fast.

Rordorf (1997) provides a detailed comparison of the account of Paul's conversion as recounted in the New Testament Acts of the Apostles and the apocryphal *Acts of Paul*, but provides no mention of Paul's three day abstinence from food (Rordorf 1997:137-144). Gans, likewise, in his groundbreaking 1985 article 'Christian morality and the Pauline revelation' ascribes tremendous importance to Paul's conversion experience in Acts 9, but makes no mention of Paul's abstinence from food (1985:97-108).

The most compelling reason to believe that this was not an intentional religious fast may be found in the internal evidence within the book of Acts. Luke records Paul's conversion on three occasions: Acts 9:3-19, Acts 22:6-16, and Acts 26:12-18. Paul's three day abstinence from food is not mentioned in Acts 22 or Acts 26. Thus, it was not a significant enough aspect of his conversion to merit mention as part of Paul's testimony. Paul was a Pharisee (Ac 23:6), and would thus have been familiar with fasting in the Jewish tradition, so it is possible that he fasted as an act of repentance and mourning after his vision of the resurrected Christ. However, there is no evidence of this, as Paul never mentions it again.

Another argument may be found in Luke's use of language. Luke uses the word for religious fasting, $\nu\eta\sigma\tau\epsilon\upsilon\omega$, and its derivatives, many times in Luke 2, 5 and 18, and in Acts 13 and 14. Each time, he uses $\nu\eta\sigma\tau\epsilon\upsilon\omega$ or a derivative. If Luke intended to communicate the idea that Paul was fasting, then his vocabulary is quite inconsistent in this text, compared to other accounts of fasting.

A final argument may be found in the silence of the early church. There is no evidence that the early church interpreted this as a fast⁴³, or that they attached special significance to Paul's abstention from food and water.

Mitchell writes: 'Because *νηστεύω* the usual word for religious fasting is not used in Acts 9, many have concluded that Saul was either unable to eat or did not think about eating because he was suffering from shock' (Mitchell 1990:463). It seems reasonable to conclude that Luke does not intend to depict religious fasting in Acts 9, and that to interpret this text as a fasting text, and thus influential to a New Testament theology of fasting would be to force an interpretation in the face of evidence to the contrary.

4.2.9 Fasting in the early Church- Acts 13:1-3; 14:21-23

Now there were at Antioch, in the church that was *there*, prophets and teachers: Barnabas, and Simeon who was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. While they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away.

(Ac 13:1-3)

After they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and *saying*, "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

(Ac 14:21-23)

Acts 13 records the commission of Paul and Barnabas for their first missionary journey. Paul, Barnabas, and several other prophets and teachers were present in the church at Antioch. The text indicates that they were engaged in a ministry of prayer and fasting, and that in this context, the Holy Spirit revealed his will that Paul and Barnabas should be set apart from the others for the missionary work to which they had been called. The

⁴³ The author expresses his gratitude to Placid Solari, O.S.B., Abbot of Belmont Abby, Belmont, North Carolina, for his assistance in searching the Greek and Latin Fathers in regard to this text.

text records that ‘when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away’ (Ac 13:3).

Acts records several instances of commissioning or appointing followers of Christ for specific work, but only two of these instances include fasting. Mitchell notes:

There is no record of fasting and laying on of hands in connection with the appointment of Matthias as an apostle (Acts 1:24-26). Likewise, at the appointment of men to help with the distribution of food the believers prayed and laid hands on their heads, but no mention is made of fasting (6:1-7). Yet here (13:3) at the commissioning of foreign missionaries and again at the ordination of elders in local churches (14:23), fasting was involved.

(Mitchell 1990:465)

These instances of commissioning have many aspects in common: in each, men are appointed to a specific task; the will of God is sought, either through direct revelation or through the discernment of God’s people; each instance involves a public gathering (or at least not a private one). Prayer is mentioned in each context (Ac 1:24; 6:6; 13:3; 14:23), though fasting is mentioned only in Acts 13 and 14. The laying on of hands is present in Acts 6, 13, and 14.

4.2.9.1 Fasting and decision-making

One may conclude at the outset from a cursory examination of the four commissions in Acts that a universal liturgy did not exist for determining and commemorating the call of a servant of Christ. It seems to always involve prayer, and may or may not include fasting or the laying on of hands. It is not immediately clear why the call of missionaries and elders was accompanied by fasting, while the call of an apostle and seven deacons was not. Perhaps the answer is to be found in the relationship of prayer to fasting. Fasting in Judaism was often an accessory to prayer, intended to lend moral urgency to prayer in seeking the will of God. In Acts 13, the revelation of God’s will was given in the context of prayer and fasting. O’Brien notes the relationship of prayer to revelatory ministry of God to his people in Acts 13: ‘Thus God’s revelation concerning the important Gentile mission was given to a church at prayer; their missionaries had been

released with prayer and fasting, and their whole work had been given over to God's grace in prayer' (O'Brien 1973:126).

Prayer was a central facet of the decision-making process of the early church, particularly in regard to the selection and appointment of personnel to carry out specific offices in the church. O'Brien writes:

We have already noted that the choice of an apostle was in answer to a request by the Jerusalem church. The commissioning of the Seven (Acts 6:1-ff) was accompanied by prayer and the laying on of hands (verse 6). By setting aside these men for the supervision of the community's financial arrangements the apostles could now devote their attention 'to prayer and to the ministry of the word', verse 4. In a summary statement (14:23) Luke points out that the newly appointed elders in the churches at Derbe, Lystra, Iconium and Pisidian Antioch were commended by prayer and fasting 'to the Lord in whom they believed'. Appointment to and ministry in specific tasks are, according to Luke, bound up with petitionary prayer.

(O'Brien 1973:124-125)

There is some dispute over the significance of fasting for the early church. Brown et al., for instance dismiss the idea that fasting is related to the revelation of God to the church: 'This is not a prelude to revelation, but a simple notice of early Christian cultic conduct' (Brown *et al.* 1968:191). Bultmann disagrees, citing this text as an example of preparation 'for the reception of revelation' (1951:102). Bultmann further expounds on the mystery of the relationship between fasting, baptism, and the laying on of hands: 'Since when a fast of one or two days mentioned by Did 7.4, Justin Apol. 61:2 (here prayer is also mentioned) preceded baptism, we do not know. Neither do we know anything definite about the ritual act of laying on of hands, which... belongs to baptism' (1951:134).

No clear pattern can be discerned from these four commissions in the book of Acts as to why the church sometimes fasted, and sometimes did not. It may be most helpful to see fasting in a secondary, rather than a primary, role in the early church, with prayer as a primary factor in determining the will of God. The church always prayed, but did not always fast. They always prayed, but did not always lay hands on those selected. Thus, fasting and laying on of hands are accessories to prayer, but are not necessary for effectual prayer. Bergant and Karris note that '[t]he Spirit worked through the leaders of

the community fasting and praying together for guidance' (Bergant & Karris 1989:1053). However, the Holy Spirit also revealed the will of God in the absence of fasting, but not in the absence of prayer.

It is possible that fasting was a more prominent feature of the church at Antioch than in Jerusalem. In the commissions made by the Jerusalem church in Acts 1 and 6, fasting is absent. At the call of Paul and Barnabas from the church at Antioch, fasting is mentioned, as well as at the commissioning of elders on the first missionary journey. Detweiler notes that Paul and Barnabas may have fasted at the appointment of these elders because of the influence of the Antioch church:

The significance of "prayer and fasting" merits further consideration, but for the purpose of the present study, it is enough to suggest that Paul and Barnabas were simply following the example of their home church which had sent them on their journey "after they had fasted and prayed".

(Detweiler 1995:39)

4.2.9.2. Conclusions

What is the significance of these texts for a New Testament theology of fasting? Several themes emerge, and are outlined below.

- There is a place for fasting in the corporate worship and decision-making process of the church. The early church seems to have practiced prayer universally, and sometimes fasted, in seeking the will of God.
- Fasting is not a requirement for the assembled church. These two accounts of prayer and fasting in the book of Acts record that fasting took place, but nothing in the text indicates that Luke intended that fasting become normative. These texts record some actions of the early church, but do not place obligation on the universal church. The early church did not always fast in making decisions.
- Fasting, as practiced by the early church in Acts, is an accessory to prayer, and is not found apart from prayer.

4.2.10 The relative silence of the epistles

When the biblical interpreter progresses beyond the gospels and Acts into the epistles, mention of fasting ceases. Though there is ample material in the epistles which provides the authors with opportunities to discuss corporate or personal fasting, it is not present in any epistle, in prescriptive or descriptive reference. Fasting is simply absent from the epistolary literature of the New Testament. Mitchell notes that the lack of references to fasting in the epistles may tell the modern reader something about the significance of fasting for the early church:

The absence of references to religious fasting outside the Synoptic Gospels and Acts implies that the practice was not considered significant in the church so long as the Apostles were alive. Paul did not even mention fasting as a form of religious piety.

(Mitchell1990:466)

There are, in the New Testament epistles, references to abstention from certain foods; specifically, meat offered to idols in Corinth. In 1 Corinthians 8:1-13, Paul discusses whether or not Christians should eat food which has been offered to idols. His conclusion is that these idols are not gods, for there is only one God, and that there is no inherent harm in eating the meat: 'But food does not commend us to God; we are neither the worse if we do not eat, nor the better if we do eat' (1 Cor 8:8). He concludes that eating meat offered to idols is a matter of Christian liberty. Christians are free to eat, but should not allow their liberty to become a stumbling block to weaker Christians, who may take offense at it. Bultmann explains:

It does not mean asceticism proper, of course, when the eating of meat offered to idols is forbidden, or when fasting is recommended to strengthen prayer, or to prepare for the reception of revelation, or when regular fasting is prescribed on two days of the week (Did. 8:1). Did. 6:3, however, does combine the prohibition of food offered to idols with ascetic abstinence. *Food-asceticism* on principle (abstinence from meat and wine) is the standpoint of the 'weak', whom Paul treats with consideration.

(Bultmann1951:102)

Fasting is not mentioned, but abstaining from certain foods which may cause offense to weaker Christians. Though in 1 Corinthians 8 Paul advocates abstaining from meat

offered to idols as a means of avoiding causing offense to weaker Christians, he did not favor regulations which required such abstention. In 1 Timothy 4:1-4 he condemns as 'liars' and 'deceitful spirits' those who advocate abstention from meat and prohibit marriage (1 Tm 4:1-3), and states that everything that God has created is good, and should be received with gratitude (1 Tm 4:4).

One explanation for the presence of fasting in the Synoptic gospels and Acts, and its absence in the epistles, can be explained in the theological, cultural, and historical purpose of these texts. The Synoptics present a provincial Jesus – a Jew of Galilee who roams the countryside, only occasionally venturing into large cities, and always experiencing conflict there. For the most part, Jesus was a rural man, with a rural ministry. His parables reflect an agrarian way of life, and his social and cultural interactions are distinctively Jewish. Paul, on the other hand is a man of the city; a man of the world. He was nurtured in the church at Antioch, and his missionary travels took him to Corinth, Ephesus, and other large cities. His epistles were written primarily to gentile converts and to metropolitan Jews in large cities. Though Paul practiced fasting, he did not advocate fasting, or give instructions for fasting, in any epistle. This may be explained by the fact that fasting was not a regular practice for his audience. Further, allusions to fasting may bring to mind in his audience pagan fasting practices, such as the worship of Demeter, which he did not intend to associate with Jesus Christ. Paul's focus is on a universal gospel, as Nock states:

There is on the face of it a cleavage between the Palestinian Gospel of Jesus, seen in or behind the Synoptists, and the Greek teaching of St. Paul... St. Paul's interests must be in humanity as whole, not merely in the scattered members of Judaism. To him, when converted, the obvious duty would be to preach to *all* the world, just as other men of Greek culture had sought to disseminate the saving truths which they had learnt (sic). The missionary ideal was inevitable to him. He had been a Pharisee, and the Pharisees were noted for proselytism. The Judaising Christians of Jerusalem wish to make converts, but converts who should fulfill the obligations of Judaism.... With St. Paul, a real offensive began.

(Nock 1964:23-25; emphasis in the original)

Thus, in the epistles, fasting is not discussed, but attention is given to abstaining from meat offered to idols. Paul advises that Christians are free to eat this or any other food, but that their liberty to eat should take into account the conscience of other Christians who may be offended by it. He opposes in the strictest terms those who would regulate abstention from meat for all Christians. As Mitchell writes, ‘... fasting was practiced in the early church. Clearly it has a place in Christian piety, but that it had a frequent place is open to serious question’ (Mitchell 1990:467).

4.3 A SYNTHETIC NEW TESTAMENT THEOLOGY OF FASTING

Having attempted to interpret significant fasting texts in the New Testament, attention is now turned to the formulation of a synthetic New Testament theology of fasting. Fasting in the New Testament is presented in a broad variety of contexts, from narrative accounts of the fasting of Christ and others, to didactic texts about the practice of fasting. In order to construct a working New Testament theology of fasting, it is necessary to extrapolate from these texts the theological and ecclesiological principles which best capture the spirit of fasting in the New Testament. Below, elements of a theology of fasting in the New Testament are presented.

Fasting in the New Testament is not bound by hard and fast rules. It is clearly influenced by Jewish fasting practices, which are also, with the exception of fasting on the Day of Atonement, not specifically regulated in the Old Testament. Neither the Old nor the New Testament attempts to prescribe parameters for the practice of fasting. Rather, fasting is presented (for the most part) as a practice in which an individual or a community may engage according to a felt need; that is, people, singularly and in community with others, are depicted as fasting voluntarily, and usually with a specific purpose in mind. Anna fasted as part of her service at the temple, Jesus fasted in preparation for his ministry, the early church at Antioch fasted when determining the will of God. It would be accurate to say that fasting in the New Testament falls under the rubric of Christian liberty. Christians are free to fast, but are not required to fast. Fasting may be performed for a number of reasons, and may be corporate or private. Ritualized fasting was not performed by Jesus or his disciples, but neither is it forbidden. Certain

individuals, such as Anna, were known to practice fasting as part of their personal piety and worship.

Fasting is associated with anticipation of the Messiah's arrival, or a longing for his presence, which may be applied as well to his anticipated parousia – this is implied in Jesus' teaching on fasting. Jesus taught that fasting should be a personal, and usually private, practice, which is intended to gain the attention of God, rather than one's fellow man. He expressly condemned fasting as a means of gaining honor or status in the sight of other people. He taught that fasting, as also tithing, does not equate to righteousness or provide justification. He juxtaposed a religious man who fasts and a sinner who repents, saying that the repentant sinner was justified, and the fasting man was not. Neither does he condemn fasting. Rather, there is a sense that the ideal would be a repentant sinner who fasts and tithes; that both internal piety and external acts of moral endeavor would be profitable. Jesus presents fasting in both moral and spiritual terms. He also warned that reliance on fasting and other moral endeavors may lead to a false trust in one's own spirituality.

Fasting is presented alongside prayer and almsgiving, the 'pillars of piety' of second-temple Judaism. Jesus does not remove it from this context, but rather teaches that these acts are to be performed for the glory of God, rather than for one's own glorification. Jesus implied that fasting, as well as other aspects of Jewish spirituality, such as Sabbath observance, may be open to reinterpretation by his followers.

Jesus fasted, and his fasting is presented in the context of temptation, and parallels are drawn between Jesus' fast in the wilderness, and both the fasting of Moses and Elijah, and the partial fast and temptation of Adam and Eve. Fasting is implied, but not prescribed, as an aid in resisting temptation. In texts which are open to dispute, fasting is presented as a means of gaining power over spiritual or natural forces, depending on one's interpretation.

The early church is presented as fasting, but not in every situation. It may be that fasting was a localized practice – it was observed in Antioch and in churches influenced by the church at Antioch, but not in Jerusalem. Corporate fasting is described in the context of determining and confirming the will of God in the appointment of missionaries and elders, but does not occur in each such instance. Corporate fasting in the early church is always presented in the context of prayer.

It is profitable at this point to return to section 4.1.1, above which provided a brief social-scientific view of fasting in the first-century Mediterranean world. Having examined relevant fasting texts in the New Testament with an eye toward attaining a social-scientific interpretation of these texts, it is now relevant to compare the social scientific review of fasting with the more concrete data of textual interpretation. What trends emerge?

First, it is noteworthy that honor and shame are prevalent themes in New Testament fasting texts. Fasting is presented as increasing the honor of the one fasting in some texts, while in others, Jesus warns against fasting as a means of gaining honor. Fasting was an important aspect of Jesus' attainment of honor in the tradition of Israelite holy men. On the whole, fasting in the New Testament brings honor, rather than shame, on those who undertake it (Anna, Jesus, Paul, Barnabas, the church at Antioch), though others are dishonored (the praying Pharisee of Luke 18). In other instances, fasting is presented as honor-neutral (the Pharisees and the disciples of John fasting), though the context implies the fasting in such an instance is honorable, and abstention from it is shameful.

It is also significant that primarily, fasting in the New Testament seems to be ritualized. Fasting is not presented in the New Testament in instances of shame, sorrow, or acute repentance for personal or national sin. Rather, fasting appears to be ritualized, and to be undertaken for specific purposes which are clear, both to the one(s) fasting, and to the broader community.

4.4 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This Chapter attempted to provide a social-scientific interpretation of fasting in the New Testament. Critical fasting texts have been examined with an eye toward articulating a coherent, synthetic New Testament theology of fasting. Significant aspects of this theology have been expressed in a short statement which summarizes a theology of fasting based on critical interpretation of New Testament texts. The next Chapter will provide an overview of Evangelicalism. It will discuss Evangelical theology, as well as Evangelical spirituality, and the role of fasting in contemporary Evangelicalism. It will conclude with a synthetic, representative Evangelical theology of fasting in a format similar to that in the current Chapter, expressing a New Testament theology of fasting. The sixth and final Chapter will then juxtapose these two theologies of fasting.

Chapter 5

Toward an Evangelical theology of fasting

5.1 INTRODUCTION

This Chapter will discuss the practice and theology of fasting in contemporary Evangelicalism. In order to place fasting into the broader context of Evangelicalism, it is necessary to describe Evangelical theology. A broad, systematic Evangelical theology is quite beyond the scope of the present work; however, a brief sketch of the most fundamental tenets of Evangelical theology will be presented. Second, Evangelical spirituality will be explored. Before one can ask ‘What do Evangelicals believe about fasting?’ it is necessary to ask ‘What do Evangelicals believe?’, and ‘What is the general nature of Evangelical spirituality?’ Only within these theological and spiritual contexts can Evangelical fasting be properly understood.

The third Section of this Chapter will explore contemporary Evangelical fasting through a review of influential popular literature. While some scholarly literature does exist concerning fasting in contemporary Evangelicalism, this literature is limited, and has had very little influence on the practice of fasting among lay Evangelicals. Rather, books by authors such as Richard Foster, Dallas Willard, Donald Whitney, and Elmer Towns have been widely received, and have shaped the practice of fasting among Evangelicals. Additionally, fasting movements, such as that promoted by Bill Bright of Campus Crusade for Christ, have brought fasting, if not to the forefront of Evangelical spirituality, at least into the collective Evangelical consciousness. Elmer Towns, dean of the School of Religion at the largest Evangelical university in the world, Liberty University, has promoted fasting to hundreds of thousands of viewers on the televised *Old Time Gospel Hour* show, and has sold books and a series of audio cassettes dedicated to fasting. To the extent that Evangelical Christians have been influenced in regard to fasting, it is these sources, rather than articles in evangelical journals such as *Bibliotheca Sacra* or the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* which have been responsible. Thus, this literature review will focus on these popular texts.

Following this literature review, an attempt will be made to articulate a synthetic, contemporary theology of fasting; that is, to describe the theology and practice of fasting as it has been presented to Evangelical Christians by contemporary Evangelical authors and leaders.

The final Chapter, Chapter 6, will attempt to juxtapose this synthetic contemporary Evangelical theology of fasting with that articulated in Chapter 4, derived from a social-scientific interpretation of fasting in the New Testament. Points of comparison and contrast will be explored, with one basic question in mind: ‘Does the contemporary Evangelical theology and practice of fasting conform to that found in the New Testament?’ From this fundamental question, of course, other questions arise, such as ‘Does the New Testament leave room for alternative interpretations of fasting which conform to the *ethos*, if not the *logos*, of the New Testament text?’ ‘Does the contemporary Evangelical view of fasting conform to the ethos of the New Testament?’ ‘What are the hermeneutical and theological boundaries within which fasting may be said to conform to the spirit of the New Testament, without a direct correlation to the New Testament text?’

Evangelicals place a high emphasis on their theology and practice being ‘biblical.’ The great question the present study seeks to answer is this: ‘Is fasting, as written about and practiced among Evangelicals today, biblical?’ If it is, in what senses is it biblical? If not, what areas require correction? Such an attempt at reconciliation will be the substance of Chapter 6.

5.2 EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY

Evangelicalism is a large, broad Christian movement, but it is not difficult to define. Pierard defines Evangelicalism as

a 20th century Christian movement, transcending confessional boundaries, that emphasizes conformity to the basic tenets of faith and a missionary outreach of compassion and urgency. An “evangelical” believes and proclaims the gospel of Jesus Christ as defined in 1 Cor. 15:1-4, the message that Christ died for our sins,

was buried, and rose again on the third day in fulfillment of the prophetic Scriptures and thereby provided the way of redemption for sinful humanity.

(Pierard1991:164)

An Evangelical may be of any of a wide range of creedal persuasions or denominations, though some denominations are decidedly more Evangelical than others. Though there have been Christians of an evangelical persuasion throughout the history of church, who can be seen in various movements, the present study is concerned with contemporary Evangelicalism – a specific movement in the church today. It is helpful to trace the historical development of this movement.

Budziszewski asserts that ‘Evangelical Christians have been conspicuous in the American public square since colonial days. Although we sometimes think of their low profile during the early twentieth century as the norm, it was actually a short-lived exception’ (2006:15). Indeed, Evangelical influence can be seen in the Great Awakenings of the United States and Britain, led by such men as Edwards and Whitefield, as well as in the abolitionist movement, exemplified by such leaders as William Wilberforce and John Newton, whose faith could be called ‘evangelical’ according to Pierard’s definition, above. Early Evangelicalism is also apparent in the popular preaching ministries of Spurgeon and Moody in London and Chicago, respectively.

Evangelicalism has become a specific movement in its own right in the history of Christianity, particularly in the United States. Church historian George Marsden identifies four stages of the growth of Evangelicalism in the United States which are significant for understanding its primary theological tenets:

- From the 1870s to the end of World War I, theological liberalism arose within Protestant denominations. During this time, Holiness-Pentecostal and revivalist groups were also formed, and an emphasis was placed on premillennialist eschatology.

- From about 1919 to 1926, modernists were attacked within mainstream Protestant denominations. An example of this can be found in the 1925 Scopes trial. Evangelicals functioned within the mainstream denominations.
- From 1926 to the 1940s, Fundamentalists began to withdraw from mainstream Protestant denominations, forming independent schools, churches, and missions agencies. There was also a geographic shift of Fundamentalism from North to South during this time.
- From the 1940s to the time of Marsden's writing in 1975, a new Evangelicalism emerged out of the Fundamentalist tradition. It would be accurate to say that from Fundamentalism, two distinct movements arose: contemporary Evangelicalism and separatist Fundamentalism. These groups, broadly speaking, share similar theologies, particularly with concern for major theological tenets such as inerrancy, the resurrection, the deity of Christ, salvation by grace, and the return of Christ. They differ in their degree of cultural engagement. Evangelicalism promotes engagement with the culture, while Fundamentalism tends to promote withdrawal and separation from the culture (Marsden 1975:124-133).

In the mid-1940s Harold J. Ockenga illustrated Marsden's fourth development in the history of Evangelicalism. In a speech at Fuller Theological Seminary in 1948, he explained the development of a movement he termed 'neo-Evangelicalism':

The new evangelicalism breaks with... three movements. The new evangelicalism breaks first with neo-orthodoxy because it (evangelicalism) accepts the authority of the Bible... He (the evangelical) breaks with the modernist... in reference to his embrace of the full orthodox system of doctrine against that which the modernist has accepted. He breaks with the fundamentalist on the fact that he believes that the Biblical teaching, the Bible doctrine and ethics, must apply to the social scene, that there must be an application of this to society as much as there is an application of it to the individual man.

(Nash 1963:14)

The neo-Evangelicalism of the 1940s and following is the basis for contemporary Evangelicalism. Evangelical theologian Paul Enns identifies several doctrinal affirmations of neo-Evangelicalism:

- Social responsibility – neo-Evangelicals sought a ‘social application of the evangelical gospel’ (Enns 1989:616), distinct from Fundamentalists who sought separation from culture at large.
- Separation – Enns is referring to separation from liberal Christianity, rather than from secular culture. Some neo-Evangelicals, such as J. Gresham Machen, separated themselves from liberal institutions and churches in an effort to create distinctively Evangelical ones (such as Machen’s leaving Princeton Theological Seminary to assist in the formation of Westminster Theological Seminary). Other neo-Evangelicals, such as E. J. Carnell and Ronald Nash argue against separatism, advocating fellowship and witness as an alternative to division.
- Inerrancy – the doctrine of inerrancy is the keystone doctrine of neo-Evangelicalism, though neo-Evangelicals may differ on its meaning. Generally, neo-Evangelicals affirm the doctrine to mean that the scriptures of the Old Testament and New Testament were inspired by God, and do not contain errors in matters of faith or practice. Traditionally, neo-Evangelicals have been committed to historical criticism, recognizing that though the scriptures are inspired by God, they are culturally conditioned.
- Science – Enns writes that ‘the relationship of modern science to the Bible differentiates neo-evangelicalism from fundamentalism (Enns 1989:617).’ The primary emphasis here is on the debate between creation and evolution. Some neo-Evangelicals, such as Bernard Ramm and E.J. Carnell, have proposed areas of compatibility between these ideas, arguing that they are not mutually exclusive (Enns 1989:616-618).

In Europe, the term ‘Evangelical’ has come to be somewhat synonymous with ‘Protestant’, and may not denote the conservative theological emphasis implied by the term in American usage (Pierard 1991:380).

Church historian David Bebbington asserts that contemporary Evangelicalism places an emphasis on conversionism, activism, Biblicism and crucicentrism (1989:1-17). That is, contemporary Evangelicals place priority on the need to be converted, or ‘born again’;

on social activism, particularly in the area of abortion; on the centrality of the Bible in Christian experience; and on Christ's atoning death on the cross for the salvation of believing humanity. Fundamentalists also place priority on conversion, the Bible, and the cross, but Evangelicalism is distinct from Fundamentalism in its emphasis on activism. 'The theologians of the postwar evangelical movement recognized that social and political concerns were, at their core, ultimately matters of theological reflection' (Moore 2001:38).

Contemporary Evangelicalism is more prominent in certain denominations, such as some Baptists, Charismatics, and certain Presbyterian denominations, but it is not limited to such denominations. Evangelicalism's theological affirmations are compatible with a broad variety of conservative theologies, including dispensationalism and covenant theology. 'Discernment of the Spirit at work across the boundaries of Calvinism, Lutheranism and Arminianism is a mark of eighteenth – and nineteenth-century evangelicalism' (Lovelace 1988:32).

Evangelicalism is not merely an American phenomenon, though the movement seems to be most centrally located in the United States. Evangelical churches and organizations exist throughout the world.

5.3 EVANGELICAL SPIRITUALITY

As Evangelicalism emerged from the theological and cultural conflicts of the late nineteenth century, it became necessary to evaluate and identify the distinctly spiritual side of Evangelical theology. The *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* in 1988 undertook just such an examination and evaluation, publishing a pair of articles by leading Evangelical scholars, which provided an appraisal of contemporary Evangelical spirituality from Biblical and historical perspectives. These articles included 'Evangelical spirituality: A Biblical scholar's perspective' by Bruce Waltke, an Old Testament scholar at Dallas Theological Seminary; and 'Evangelical spirituality: A church historian's perspective', by Richard Lovelace, a church historian teaching at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. These articles provide a strong starting point for a critique of

contemporary Evangelical spirituality, as they were written for the express purpose of summarizing and evaluating the state of Evangelical spirituality 25 years prior to the present study. Such detailed, scholarly appraisal of Evangelical spirituality has not been published since. Though a quarter of a century has passed, it will be noted that the observations made regarding Evangelicalism in the late 1980s will still ring true; in fact, many aspects of Evangelical spirituality identified by these authors are amplified in contemporary times.

5.3.1 An historical perspective

Richard Lovelace provides an historical perspective on the state of contemporary Evangelical spirituality, discussing Evangelical precedents in theological and spiritual movements in church history, from the Protestant Reformation forward. A brief survey of Lovelace's findings follows.

5.3.1.1 The Protestant Reformation

In the Protestant Reformation, a new emphasis in spirituality emerged from the mysticism and asceticism of medieval Christianity. As the doctrines of grace rose to prominence, theologies of salvation and sanctification began to diverge from one another, though both were seen as grace-centered. Sanctification came to be seen as a *process*, rather than a *progression*:

The western mystical tradition, from Augustine through Bernard and the Rhineland mystics, moved beyond this spiritual masochism to see that mortifying sin was the goal of sanctification and that this was not usually helped by punishing the body. But ascetic mysticism characteristically views spiritual growth as the result of hard work. A central image of this literature is the ladder. One starts at the bottom, and there are thirteen steps that must be climbed, for instance, to move from pride to humility.

(Lovelace 1988:27)

The spiritual theology of Luther, Calvin, and other Reformers declares grace as the operative factor in spirituality. Spiritual formation, then, is not a progression similar to the medieval guild system, in which novices gradually ascend through a series of ranks based on knowledge and experience, but rather is rooted in the ontological change brought about by the adoption of a believer into the family of God:

And this is the genius of Reformation spirituality. It assumes that the simplest believer leaps to the top of the spiritual ladder simply by realistic faith in Jesus Christ. Consistent Protestants start every day at the top of the ladder, receiving by faith what only God can give and what cannot be achieved by human efforts: assurance of salvation, and the guiding presence of the Holy Spirit. They may slip down a few rungs during the course of the day, but the way up again is not by climbing. It is by the vault of faith.

(Lovelace 1988:27)

The Holy Spirit, rather than the church, is seen as the divine aid through which the believer can live in conformity to the example of Christ. Rather than seeking union with Christ through mystical or ascetical means, the reformed or Evangelical believer assumes union with Christ on the basis of faith, and this union with Christ is the basis of all other spiritual activity:

Similarly Luther stands the *via triplex* on its head. Union with Christ, received by faith, is the foundation of evangelical spirituality, not the final achievement. The illumination of the Holy Spirit then comes in to break up our darkness and show us our sins. Purgation of sin, finally, is a sanctification process in which we are led by the Spirit to recognize, confess and put to death the particular patterns of sin that are present in our characteristic fallen nature.

(Lovelace 1988:27)

Evangelical spirituality, in the tradition of reformation spirituality, sees the believer's spiritual state as a holiness which is imputed by God on the basis of faith, rather than attained through the believer's merit.

Evangelical piety is first of all a spirituality of faith as opposed to one of achievement. Responding to an ascetic model of Christian experience, Protestantism adopted an essentially pentecostal or charismatic model. Spirituality comes not through laborious cultivation of the human spirit but through the gracious gift of the Holy Spirit. It is a spirituality that flourishes in the atmosphere of faith. It is not worked up through ascetic exercises but infused directly, as at Pentecost. In Roman Catholic terms, infused contemplation is thus the common inheritance of all laity and clergy and not the private prerogative of those with ascetic vocations.

(Lovelace 1988:28)

Fasting is a spiritual discipline, rather than a state of grace. What role did the spiritual disciplines play in the theology of the Reformers, who (broadly speaking) rejected the idea of sacraments as a means of receiving grace?

The Reformers shied away from spiritual exercises as a road to growth, though they did stress the need to hear and read Scripture in order to nourish faith and the need to pray in order to express faith. John Calvin also balanced Luther's emphasis on justification by an intensive treatment of sanctification. Out of the material in the application sections of Paul's letters, Calvin carefully drew an understanding of spiritual growth through mortification of sin and vivification of every aspect of the personality by the Spirit's releasing work. Calvin's later disciple, John Owen, went so far as to say that 'the vigor and power of spiritual life are dependent upon mortification of sin.' The Reformed tradition thus made a strong effort to rule out cheap grace.

(Lovelace 1988:29)

This emphasis on rejecting 'cheap grace' is a common theme in Evangelical spirituality. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's influential book *The cost of discipleship* is dedicated to this very theme. Bonhoeffer writes:

Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.... Costly grace is the sanctuary of God; it has to be protected from the world, and not thrown to the dogs. It is therefore the living word, the Word of God, which he speaks as it pleases him.

(Bonhoeffer 1995:44-45)

This is a theme which has been emphasized among contemporary Evangelical authors, such as in Jerry Bridges' book *The discipline of grace: God's role and our role in the pursuit of holiness*, in which the author states: 'Grace and the personal discipline required to pursue holiness, however, are not opposed to each other... An understanding of how grace and personal, vigorous effort work together is essential for a lifelong pursuit of holiness' (Bridges 1994:13).

While Evangelicals may be Calvinist or semi-Pelagian in their soteriology, it is a central tenet of Evangelical theology that salvation and sanctification are, to whatever extent, works of the grace of God. The extent to which humanity acts with free moral agency in response to God's grace is the subject of dispute among some Evangelicals, but that God's grace is the means of both salvation and holiness is not.

5.3.1.2 Puritans, Pietism, and the Great Awakenings

The second historical precedent which Lovelace traces in the lineage of Evangelical spirituality is the era of the Puritans, the rise of Pietism, and the Great Awakenings in America and Britain. Lovelace notes that these movements are a continuation of the theme of grace emphasized in the Reformation: 'These movements appear to be an ascetic movement within Protestantism reacting against cheap grace. Puritans wanted congregations of 'visible saints' who were not simply 'notionally orthodox' but were spiritually alive' (1988:29).

Puritan spirituality reacted to the spirituality of the counter-Reformation by attempting to 'graft patristic and medieval spirituality on to the Reformation base of justification by faith' (Lovelace 1988:30). At times, this foundation of grace became obscured by an emphasis on rigorous asceticism. Lovelace cites Max Weber in pointing out that this was an 'innerweltliche Askese', or 'inner-worldly asceticism' (1988:30). That is, rather than engage in physical asceticism, such as self-flagellation, the Puritans practiced mental asceticism. Where physical ascetics sought to control the desires of the body, and bring it under subjection, the Puritans sought to control the mind in 'an effort to turn ordinary Protestant laypersons into married, unenclosed monastics practicing Scriptural mysticism' (Lovelace 1988:30).

Contemporary Evangelical spirituality has retained many aspects of Puritan spirituality. For example, the practice of a daily 'quiet time' of prayer and Bible reading was introduced by the Puritans, and has become perhaps the most common personal spiritual practice of Evangelicals today. The customs of prayers before meals and family devotions and prayers were also handed down from the Puritans, and became hallmarks of American Evangelicalism. The Puritans also recommended short, ejaculatory prayers during the day, and encouraged reflection on the 'symbolic meaning of events and objects (Lovelace 1988:30)', in an attempt to find spiritual meaning in everyday life. Puritans also invented the 'use of spiritual diaries as a kind of Protestant substitute for the confessional' (Lovelace 1988:30).

The goal of Puritan spirituality was a personal holiness which demonstrated the ‘power of godliness’, and not simply ‘a form of godliness’ (2 Tm 3:5) which denied the true power of God. Puritans saw the twin dangers of ‘lifeless traditionalism on the right and heterodoxy on the left (Lovelace 1988:31),’ and sought to avoid both extremes.

From the Puritan emphasis on personal spirituality arose the corporate spirituality of the two Great Awakenings. Lovelace explains:

This ethos is carried over into the evangelicalism of the first and second awakenings, which are Puritanism and pietism on the march, replicating their vision of individual spirituality through the conversion of the masses. Awakening spirituality was not simply the perfecting of saintly individuals, however. It involved waiting on God in corporate prayer for pentecostal outpourings of the Holy Spirit, to energize the Church and form it into troop movements assaulting the kingdom of darkness.

(Lovelace1988:31-32)

This militant, evangelistic faith was very influential in shaping the state of contemporary Evangelical Christianity. During and after the Great Awakenings, the Evangelical practice of mass evangelism was developed, and continues in Evangelicalism to this day. The most prominent Evangelical evangelist of recent times is Billy Graham, but he stands in a tradition of evangelists including D.L. Moody, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, Billy Sunday, Charles Finney; a line which extends back to the Wesleys, Whitefield, and Edwards. The public, corporate Evangelicalism of the Great Awakenings continues to influence the practice of contemporary Evangelicalism.

As Evangelicalism shifted from the Puritan emphasis on inner piety to the outward emphasis of the awakenings, it began to interact with the social and moral issues brought about by the Industrial Revolution, particularly in England and the northeastern American states, where the Industrial Revolution was felt most profoundly. Issues such as poverty, workers’ rights, women’s’ rights, and slavery were addressed by these Evangelical Christians. Lovelace explains:

A dimension of evangelical spirituality enlarged during the awakenings was concern for moral and social reform. The Wesleyan movement reached the poor in England and articulated their concerns to the “Evangelical United Front,” which included

Anglican leaders like John Newton. Evangelical laity – leaders who spent three hours daily in intercessory prayer – sought not only to evangelize individuals but also to change society, to abolish slavery and wage-slavery. A socially progressive mindset, an awakened sensitivity to information, and extensive prayer drove the transforming impact of the second awakening in England and America.

(Lovelace 1988:32)

Into the twentieth century, Evangelicalism continued to retain a focus on social and moral issues, such as the Civil Rights Movement in the United States in the 1960s, and the abortion debate of the 1970s (which continues to this day in the United States). Examples of Evangelical writing during this time period which emphasize moral and social issues includes *The social conscience of the Evangelical*, by Sherwood Eliot Wirt (1968), which attempts to create a Biblical and theoretical framework for Evangelical social action, and *Whatever happened to the human race?*, by Francis Schaeffer and C. Everett Koop (1979), which deals specifically with abortion.

In summarizing the state of contemporary Evangelical spirituality, Lovelace offers a few points, here summarized:

- Lovelace describes a ‘sanctification gap’ in Evangelical spirituality. That is, the doctrine of salvation is separated from the doctrine of sanctification. The result is

a weakened sense of the holiness of God and the depth of personal sin.... The possibility of losing the assurance of one’s salvation is not even intimated. In fact, converts are urged to believe they are saved as though this were one of the main doctrines of the faith. The themes of holiness and continued sanctification are very much muted compared to the Puritan and awakening eras.

(Lovelace 1988:33)

- Lovelace asserts that Evangelicals, through the tradition of Fundamentalism, ‘inherited and emphasized one of the weaker sides of Puritanism, its sectarian legalism’ (1988:33). He describes Evangelicals as ‘captive to revivalist traditionalism’ (1988:33).
- Lovelace describes an emerging conflict within Evangelicalism between a developing theology of culture, and a diminishing emphasis on spirituality. He describes an ‘active distrust of Christian experience’ (1988:33).

- Lovelace states that the charismatic renewal movement within Evangelicalism lacks the ‘rational and theological checks against error and credulity maintained by evangelicals’ (Lovelace 1988:33). As an example, he cites the ‘health-and-wealth gospel, the most virulent form of the American heresy that Christianity guarantees worldly success’ (1988:33).
- Lovelace describes contemporary Evangelicalism as having ‘a depressed consciousness of social sin and a weakened prophetic emphasis compared to mainline Protestants and Roman Catholics’ (1988:34). Lovelace attributes this to the fact that Evangelicals are ‘captivated by conservative economic ideologies’ (1988:34).
- Finally, Lovelace asserts that contemporary Evangelicalism is no longer the dominant Christian voice in addressing social and moral issues: ‘Some important moral issues are being addressed by right-wing evangelicals. But the kind of impact made by evangelical Protestants in the nineteenth century is mainly visible in Catholic circles today’ (1988:34).

Lovelace also offers three suggestions for reinvigorating Evangelical spirituality. These are relevant in that they may assist in articulating Evangelical spirituality as it should be, rather than simply as it is, and for determining the role of disciplines such as fasting in such a spirituality.

We may need to move back toward the ascetic model of spirituality. The great spiritual awakenings have come when both the ascetic and pentecostal models have been in force—where there is a balance in the stress on faith and works, on justification and sanctification.... The new interest in spiritual disciplines shows that we are trying to recover balance. This will be most fruitful if we also begin to explore the little-known areas of holiness and continued sanctification. We may need to challenge more, and comfort less, in our evangelism and discipleship. We need to make it harder for our people to retain assurance of salvation when they move into serious sin.... We have become sloppy and sentimental in promoting assurance under any circumstances. We need to listen hard—because God is speaking to us loudly and clearly about the road to recovering the spiritual depth of classical evangelicalism We need to listen carefully to other kinds of Christians. Mainline Protestants, Roman Catholics and Orthodox believers have preserved Biblical values that we lack. And they often have clear insights about our faults that could help us toward repentance.

(Lovelace 1988:34-35; emphasis in the original)

5.3.1.3 The emergence of fasting in contemporary Evangelical spirituality: Historical considerations

Lovelace has placed contemporary Evangelical spirituality into its historical context, identifying not only historical precedents, but emerging trends within Evangelicalism. He has offered an historian's perspective on the future of Evangelicalism. This perspective includes the need to place greater emphasis on ascetic spirituality, and to look to parallel traditions within Christianity. Both of these emphases leave room for an expanded practice of fasting within Evangelical spirituality. In fact, this is exactly what happened. In the years since 1988, fasting has been much more widely promoted within Evangelical circles. An example of this may be found in popular publications related to fasting. Prior to the time Lovelace wrote his article, there were two widely circulated Evangelical books pertaining to fasting: those of Wallis (1968) and Foster (1978). In 1988, Willard published *Spirit of the disciplines*, which included an analysis of fasting from an Evangelical perspective. Whitney published *Spiritual disciplines for the Christian life* in 1991. In the mid-1990s Evangelicals began to focus on prayer and fasting on a large scale. This focus was led by Bill Bright, an Evangelical leader and founder of Campus Crusade for Christ. In 1995, Bright published *The coming revival: America's call to fast, pray and seek God's face*, as well as a tract titled *7 basic steps to successful prayer and fasting*. In 1997, Bright wrote *The transforming power of prayer and fasting*, his most influential fasting text, followed by a brief tractate titled *5 steps to prayer and fasting* in 1998. Bright died in 2003, and in 2010 Ronnie Floyd, a prominent Evangelical pastor and former president of the Southern Baptist Convention, published a revised edition of Bright's 1998 text titled *The power of prayer and fasting*.

In 1996, Elmer Towns wrote *Fasting for spiritual breakthrough*, which was widely promoted on the *Old Time Gospel Hour* television program, associated with the Evangelical bulwarks Liberty University and Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Virginia. Audio cassettes of Towns teaching the content of the book were also sold. This broad Evangelical exposure to fasting led to an emphasis on prayer and fasting in the public sphere. In 1998, Elmer Towns and Jerry Falwell wrote *Fasting can change your life*, a book which provided a fasting narrative based on the experiences of prominent

Evangelical leaders, including Falwell and Towns, Bright, and pastors Jack Hayford and D. James Kennedy, among others. These leaders and books were quite influential in shaping contemporary Evangelical theology and practice of fasting, as will be noted in the literature review below (see § 5.4).

5.3.2 A biblical and theological perspective

Evangelicalism is defined by its relationship to the Bible, the *evangel* from which it draws its name. Thus, in order to define evangelical spirituality, it is necessary to examine evangelical theology and spirituality in the context of Biblical spirituality. It is not possible, nor desirable, in the present study to clearly demarcate all the boundaries of evangelical theology, though some broad themes will be explored here. Waltke's 1988 article provides a useful point of departure in this regard.

Waltke begins by attempting to place contemporary evangelicalism into its contexts, both secular and religious. How does evangelicalism relate to secular culture, and to contemporary liberal theology? Waltke writes that modern secular culture has replaced God with physical science and with social engineering:

Modern secular culture, at least as it is represented by the news media, thinks it gets along quite well without God. Armed with technology based on scientific descriptions of the material and social universes, modern society aims to affect life and control the environment against the risk and contingencies of death and chaos. Modern man, who has expelled God from his universe, thinks he has achieved a relatively high measure of security in individual life through science, technology and social engineering.

(Waltke 1988:9-10)

Waltke asserts that contemporary liberal theology is similar in some ways to secular culture, in that the immanence of God is lost. God is not the personal Being depicted in Scripture, one who acts in human experience, loves, and can be loved. Rather, says Waltke:

Contemporary theologians reinforce the contemporary *vox populi*. Pannenberg also notes that dialectical theology by its emphasis on the absolute transcendence of God, existential theology by its denial that God is approachable as a being in himself, and Paul Tillich by his theory that God is absorbed into the world by

disappearing into its 'depth' – as well as other contemporary notions about God – all deny the possibility of a personal relationship with the God of Scripture.

(Waltke 1988:10)

Evangelical theology is a relational theology rooted in the gospel – the message that God forgives sinners who repent and place faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God. This relational aspect of evangelical theology affects every other aspect, including evangelical spirituality, hermeneutics, and theological worldview. Waltke writes:

In sum, the world apart from faith in God is spiritually dead. By contrast evangelicals find spiritual life through faith in God. Although many evangelicals are not Calvinist, they will applaud Calvin's decision to root in faith the way in which saints receive the grace of Christ.

(Waltke 1988:10)

Waltke underscores the personal, relational nature of evangelical theology:

All evangelicals believe in a personal God who enters into a personal "I-thou" relationship with those who trust him. In the Bible, and consequently for the evangelical who finds his knowledge of God in Scripture, God is not merely an inferred First Cause, or the hearsay of the saints met in Scripture and in Church history, or an ideal of all that is beautiful, or even a system of divine matters, but a Person. Any other way of knowing God than in a personal relationship is idolatry. God walked with Adam, called the patriarchs, offered Israel at Sinai not an impersonal contract but a very personal covenant, and promises in the new covenant that the elect will know him. Jesus taught his disciples to address him as Father.

(Waltke 1988:11)

Rennie amplifies this concept of Evangelical theology as relational and spiritual:

Finally, it should be emphasized that evangelical theology is what might be termed a spiritual theology. It has a way of doing theology which is again part of the great theological tradition. It is 'live' orthodoxy. The Bible is not only central to the theological enterprise, but it is meditated upon and prayed over as well as studied. The goal of theological work is not so much to know theology as to know God...

(Rennie 1988:240)

This is not to say that Evangelical theology is purely subjective; that God is whoever any given Evangelical wants God to be. Rather, Evangelicals place a high emphasis on the Bible as the inerrant Word of God, authoritative in matters of faith and practice.

Evangelicals believe that God inspired the original authors to write the original texts, or autographs, of the Old Testament and New Testament. The definitive statement of this doctrine is to be found in the *Chicago Statement of Biblical Inerrancy*, written in 1978 by a council of prominent evangelical scholars. The statement contains a detailed list of affirmations and denials, but is summarized in five points:

1. God, who is Himself Truth and speaks truth only, has inspired Holy Scripture in order thereby to reveal Himself to lost mankind through Jesus Christ as Creator and Lord, Redeemer and Judge. Holy Scripture is God's witness to Himself.
2. Holy Scripture, being God's own Word, written by men prepared and superintended by His Spirit, is of infallible divine authority in all matters upon which it touches: It is to be believed, as God's instruction, in all that it affirms; obeyed, as God's command, in all that it requires; embraced, as God's pledge, in all that it promises.
3. The Holy Spirit, Scripture's divine Author, both authenticates it to us by His inward witness and opens our minds to understand its meaning.
4. Being wholly and verbally God-given, Scripture is without error or fault in all its teaching, no less in what it states about God's acts in creation, about the events of world history, and about its own literary origins under God, than in its witness to God's saving grace in individual lives.
5. The authority of Scripture is inescapably impaired if this total divine inerrancy is in any way limited or disregarded, or made relative to a view of truth contrary to the Bible's own; and such lapses bring serious loss to both the individual and the Church.

(<http://www.spurgeon.org/~phil/creeds/chicago.htm>)

Evangelicals believe that the God who has revealed Himself in the Bible is the same God who is imminent in human experience. Thus, the Bible is a source of authority for Christian faith and practice, connecting the believer to its divine Author's eternal purpose and progressive revelation of Himself into human experience. It is important to Evangelicals that their beliefs and actions be 'biblical' – that they conform to the teaching and example of the Bible. Thus, Evangelical spirituality strives to be a Biblical spirituality. Waltke notes that

For some evangelicals spirituality is equated with exercising spiritual gifts, for others it is measured by souls won to Christ, and for still others it is the quest for self-improvement through sound doctrine. Most evangelicals will agree with Augustine and Calvin that spirituality is best defined as love of God and love of man.

(Waltke 1988:9)

Waltke warns that secular influences threaten the Biblical nature of Evangelical spirituality by depriving Evangelical Christians of a proper theology of sin – that hamartiology fundamentally affects spirituality. He writes:

Today, however, traditional evangelical spiritual energy is being vitiated through the critical dissolution of a guilt consciousness brought about by osmosis from the world. The effect of Nietzsche's and Freud's criticism on the credibility of traditional Christian piety has been almost fatal. Allan Bloom says unequivocally that "psychologists are the sworn enemies of guilt." Christian counseling may deflect itself to the false goal of trying to make people feel happy rather than to make them holy. As faith in God leads to fear of him, so godly fear leads to repentance before him.

(Waltke 1988:15-16)

Waltke's point is clear – as Evangelicals depart from a Biblical anthropology in favor of secular psychology, their sense of dependence on God for grace will diminish. For Waltke, repentance is the foundation of Evangelical spirituality: 'Faith in God, fear of God, and repentance before him are all foundational to love of God because they lead to gratitude for his forgiveness' (1988:16).

Having explored contemporary Evangelicalism from historical, spiritual, and theological perspectives, attention is now turned to fasting in contemporary Evangelicalism.

5.4 FASTING IN CONTEMPORARY EVANGELICAL LITERATURE

This Section provides a review of popular, contemporary Evangelical fasting literature. This is the literature which has had the greatest impact on Evangelicals' theology and practice of fasting in recent years. This literature is reviewed chronologically.

5.4.1 Arthur Wallis

The first Evangelical author in the modern era to address fasting was Arthur Wallis, in his book *God's chosen fast: A spiritual and practical guide to fasting*, published in 1968. Wallis explains his motivation for writing about fasting in the preface to his book:

Having proved the great value and blessing of fasting over many years, I was concerned that so many earnest believers have apparently never given the subject any serious thought. This concern became a constraint to share with those who hunger for God's best, what the Bible has to say about this spiritual exercise.

(Wallis 1968:7)

Wallis provides detailed instruction on fasting, from both Biblical and practical points of view. His writing is more than a discussion of Biblical text pertaining to fasting. It is a passionate call to the church, a plea, for prayer and fasting. Reading Wallis' book, one can discern that fasting is the cry of the author's heart. Wallis does not write merely to inform, but to persuade his readers to make fasting an integral part of their spiritual experience. The book was very well received, undergoing 5 printings between 1968 and 1972.

Wallis introduced fasting to a generation in which Biblical fasting was largely unknown. In keeping with the task, he takes a broad, comprehensive view. He discusses reasons for fasting, types of fasting, and practical considerations, as well as specific Biblical texts. Wallis draws from the Old Testament and New Testament, citing the experience of contemporary Christians (primarily in Europe and Asia) which corresponded to the fasts of Biblical characters. Like later evangelical authors who followed him (notably Towns), Wallis draws the inference that the experience of Biblical characters is normative in defining the role of fasting, and that God's response to fasting in the Bible corresponds to the specific motive and circumstances of the person fasting. In philosophical terms, one might call this the 'naturalistic fallacy' – conflating what *is*, with what *should be*. This is to be expected, of course – the experiences of Biblical characters are held up as moral examples, and it is assumed that their spiritual experiences have a specific correlation to those of contemporary believers. Unlike some later, authors, Wallis does not exaggerate this conflation of Biblical and contemporary

fasting, assuming a direct, specific cause and effect relationship between fasting and the movement of God in response to it in the Biblical narrative.

Wallis is certainly to be commended for bringing the practice of fasting back into the evangelical consciousness. Walls' book was an attempt to restore emphasis on a spiritual practice as the evangelical movement was emerging from divisive theological battles, such as the Fundamentalist/Modernist controversy, the 'social gospel', debates over inerrancy, and social ethical issues, such as the Civil Rights Movement. Wallis calls the evangelical church to fast and to pray, rather than to seek new means of self-differentiation from other Christians. In this, he does the church a great service. However, there is room for critique of his treatment of fasting.

Specifically, Wallis is prone to exaggerate the role of fasting in the New Testament, both in its legitimate uses and in its distortions. He writes:

In New Testament times fasting was a channel of power. As spirituality waned and worldliness flourished in the churches, the power and gifts of the Spirit were withdrawn. With the loss of that inward power men could only cling to what they had left, its outward accompaniment. More and more emphasis was placed on the outward act of fasting, though bereft of the inward spirit that alone could give it value. Asceticism became the mark of piety and spirituality.

(Wallis 1968:11)

As Chapter 4 of the present study demonstrated, fasting was not the subject of emphasis in the early church. It was practiced rarely in the book of Acts, and is not discussed in the epistles. Simply put, the New Testament does not describe ascetic fasting as a practice, for good or ill, of the early church. To say that fasting was a 'channel of power' is perhaps hyperbole, as only two parallel New Testament texts ascribe spiritual power to the practice of fasting (Mt 17:21; Mk 9:29), and the authenticity of these texts is in dispute. Wallis recognizes this textual problem, and believes that the reference to spiritual authority being derived from fasting in these texts is not authentic (Wallis 1968:108-109). Where, then, is fasting a 'channel of power' in the New Testament? A summary of this critique of Wallis might be simply to state that

Wallis places an emphasis on what fasting might *do*, what might result externally (for example, deliverance from addiction or the answer to prayer), rather than on the experience of fasting for its own sake (or for reasons that are not immediately visible), and he seems to read this emphasis into the Biblical texts he critiques. As the previous Chapter of this study demonstrated, fasting seldom had external, visible results in the New Testament.

The greatest value of Wallis' book is not the contribution of new knowledge of fasting to the body of theological scholarship, but rather, the awakening of the evangelical church to the potential benefits and impact of fasting on their spiritual experience. Wallis does not promise that fasting will solve all the church's problems, nor that it will make one Christian holier than another (or even holier than he or she was before fasting). Rather, he invites the church to enter into the experience of fasting as a God-ordained experience, to which God responds.

Wallis' book came onto the scene at a time when evangelical theology had eclipsed evangelical spirituality, when many evangelicals were more concerned with being right than with being holy. Wallis reminds his reader that:

Fasting *is* important – more important, perhaps, than many of us have supposed, as I trust this book will reveal. For all that, it is not a major biblical doctrine, a foundation stone of the faith, or a panacea for every spiritual ill. Nevertheless, when exercised with a pure heart and a right motive, fasting may provide us with a key to unlock doors where other keys have failed; a window opening up new horizons in the unseen world; a spiritual weapon of God's providing, "mighty, to the pulling down of strongholds."

(Wallis 1968:8)

5.4.1.1 Wallis' theology of fasting

Wallis does not write to articulate a concise theology of fasting, but to apply exegetical and practical concepts to the practice of fasting. However, one can derive several elements of a theology of fasting from Wallis' text. These are discussed briefly below.

First, Wallis presents fasting as a means of accessing divine power, favor, or authority. He describes fasting as a means to change God's mind (Wallis 1968:44-47), to release Christians from psychological and chemical addictions, as well as from the 'bonds of iniquity' (Wallis 1968:50). Fasting is a means toward the discernment of spirits (Wallis 1968:51), as well as deliverance from evil spirits. He writes:

In setting free one who is in Satan's power, a "softening-up" process by prayer is often necessary. A fast undertaken at God's direction will strengthen the intercessor to maintain pressure until the enemy is compelled to loosen his grasp of the captive. Then fasting will also give authority, when God's moment comes, to speak the commanding word that effects the release. This is one of the open secrets behind a ministry of deliverance from the power of Satan.

(Wallis 1968:51-52)

For Wallis, fasting is a source of power, but it does not carry the power of a ritual; that is, no power in its own right to change the status of the one fasting. Rather, fasting complements, and perhaps amplifies, the necessary elements of confession, repentance, and faith. For Wallis, fasting is more a ceremony – it may occur frequently, and may carry a range of meaning.

In this regard, Wallis seems to view fasting as an aspect of intercessory prayer for the deliverance of others, rather than one fasting for one's own deliverance:

It is true that deliverance is seldom possible unless those possessed or bound are wholly desirous of it, and ready by repentance and confession of any sin which has opened the door to Satan, to deprive him of any rights within them. Especially is this true in the case of professed believers. But so often there *is* this deep desire on the part of those afflicted, but no one to whom they can turn who will use the God-given authority, pay the price if need be in prayer and fasting, and command the deliverance. God give us the vision and the faith in this hour of need.

(Wallis 1968:56)

A second aspect of Wallis' theology of fasting involves national repentance. Wallis sees fasting as an accessory to prayer and repentance on behalf of one's nation, in the tradition of the fasting and repentance of Nineveh in the Old Testament book of Jonah. Wallis writes:

But if God can find those who will stand in the gap, even in this eleventh hour, and humble themselves with prayer and fasting, there may yet be a lengthening of our tranquility. God may yet turn and repent and leave a blessing behind Him, giving us mercy instead of wrath, and revival instead of judgment.

(Wallis 1968:47)

This aspect of Wallis' view of fasting is consistent with American Evangelicalism, which often emphasizes national righteousness and repentance, and applies Old Testament texts in reference to God's protection of Israel to America or other 'nations of the West' (1968:46).

A third aspect of Wallis' theology of fasting is that it emphasizes personal righteousness. Wallis (1968:32-36) describes 'fasting unto God' as well as personal sanctity. Wallis sees fasting as 'a divine corrective to the pride of the human heart. It is a discipline of the body with a tendency to humble the soul' (1968:37). This theme of fasting as an element of personal righteousness is repeated quite often in subsequent Evangelical literature.

5.4.2 Richard Foster

Richard Foster was one of the most influential evangelical spiritual authors of the 1970s and 1980s. His book *Celebration of discipline: The path to spiritual growth* was perhaps the most influential evangelical book of practical spirituality of the latter twentieth century. More than 30 years after its publication in 1978, it is still in print. In this book, Foster takes a broad view of the spiritual disciplines, drawing from a number of traditions, but with an emphasis on the New Testament, the Great Awakenings, and the Puritans. He draws from his own Quaker tradition as well. Foster begins by describing the spiritual disciplines as the 'door to liberation' from ingrained sinful habits. He writes:

In this regard it would be proper to speak of the "the path of disciplined grace." It is "grace" because it is free; it is "disciplined" because there is something for us to do. In *The Cost of Discipleship* Dietrich Bonhoeffer makes it clear that grace is free, but it is not cheap. The grace of God is unearned and unearnable, but if we ever expect to grow in grace, we must pay the price of a consciously chosen course of action

which involves both individual and group life. Spiritual growth is the purpose of the Disciplines.

(Foster 1978:8)

Foster divides the disciplines into three categories: inward disciplines, outward disciplines, and corporate disciplines. The inward disciplines include meditation, prayer, fasting, and study. The outward disciplines are simplicity, solitude, submission, and service. The corporate disciplines Foster describes are confession, worship, guidance, and celebration. Foster's book is not about fasting *per se*, but about a life of discipline, and fasting is discussed in this context. This book was widely distributed, and Foster also produced a videotape series in which he discussed the spiritual disciplines. As such, his theology of fasting became quite influential among evangelicals. Foster noted in 1978 that 'a renewed interest in fasting has developed, but we have far to go to recover a Biblical balance' (1978:47). His chapter on fasting is an attempt to move toward this Biblical balance.

Foster begins with a simple, if simplistic, Biblical definition of fasting: 'abstaining from food from spiritual purposes' (1978:48). He draws a distinction between Biblical fasting and hunger strikes for political purposes, as well as therapeutic fasting. He does not delegitimize these forms of fasting, but focuses on the Biblical dimensions of spiritual fasting: 'Biblical fasting always centers on spiritual purposes' (Foster 1978:49). Foster notes that Biblical depictions of fasting include both absolute and partial fasts, including fasts from food, food and water, or only certain foods.

One may charge Foster with conflating his view of fasting, received primarily from the Puritans, onto the Biblical text. For example, he writes of Biblical accounts of fasting: 'in most cases fasting is a private matter between the individual and God' (1978:50). The preceding two Chapters of this study highlight the social nature of fasting in the Old Testament and New Testament. While there are instances of private fasting in both testaments, in most cases the fasting was public, or involved a group of people fasting together for a specific purpose.

Foster devotes significant attention to the question of whether fasting is commanded in the Bible. The answer, he says, is that fasting is not a command: 'There simply are no Biblical laws that command regular fasting' (Foster 1978:51). Foster argues that fasting is not commanded; rather, it is an opportunity to participate in a more active prayer life and relationship with God. He writes:

Perhaps it is best to avoid the term "command" since in the strictest sense Jesus did not command fasting. But it is obvious that he proceeded on the principle that the children of the kingdom of God would fast. For the person longing for a more intimate walk with God, these statements of Jesus are drawing words.

(Foster 1978:54)

Here again, Foster's superimposition of Puritan views of fasting onto the New Testament text may be seen. Fasting as a form of personal piety, for a 'more intimate walk with God' is conspicuously absent from the New Testament. Instances of fasting in the New Testament were clearly associated with a specific outcome, such as spiritual authority, answer to prayer, decision making, et cetera. While fasting may certainly be an aspect of piety and intimacy, Jesus does not speak of it as such. Perhaps Foster's Quaker and Puritan roots have led him to bring this assumption to the text?

5.4.2.1 Foster's theology of fasting

Where Wallis emphasized the spiritual power associated with Christian fasting, Foster turns the discipline inward, focusing on fasting as a vehicle for increased intimacy with God. Foster properly associates fasting with prayer in *Celebration of discipline*; however, in his 1992 book titled *Prayer: Finding the heart's true home*, in which he discusses many aspects of prayer, fasting is not mentioned. Perhaps this is indicative of the relative importance of fasting in Foster's theology – prayer is an essential discipline, but fasting is not. The Christian, for Foster, must pray, but may choose to fast or not. Likewise, his 1985 volume *The challenge of the disciplined life: Christian reflections on money, sex and power* makes no mention of fasting, though in *Celebration of discipline* he writes: 'More than any other Discipline, fasting reveals the things that control us' (Foster 1978:55). As Foster continued to write and think about Evangelical spirituality after 1978, fasting did not emerge as a prominent feature of his theology. However, his

initial book proved quite influential, selling over one million copies. Several themes converge from this book which allow the observant reader to articulate Foster's theology of fasting:

- Fasting is voluntary, not obligatory. Foster sees fasting as an opportunity, rather than a requirement.
- Fasting is a means to greater intimacy with God. Though certain spiritual and physical benefits may accompany fasting, these should never become the primary focus. Foster writes 'Physical benefits, success in prayer, the enduing with power, spiritual insights – these must never replace God as the center of our fasting' (Foster 1978:55).
- Fasting, for Foster, is an aid to prayer, but is not essential for prayer. Likewise, fasting is not essential for the Christian seeking a proper relationship to money, sex, or power.
- Fasting is an important, but minor, aspect of New Testament spirituality. Likewise with Foster's spiritual theology: fasting is significant, but not primary.

5.4.3 Dallas Willard

Dallas Willard, a philosopher and Evangelical scholar, published *Spirit of the disciplines: Understanding how God changes lives*, in 1990. His purpose in this volume was to move beyond mechanical interpretations of the spiritual disciplines, and get to the theology behind them. Willard is not so much interested in *how* to fast, as *why* to fast, and what the Christian might expect from God in relation to fasting. In addition to fasting, Willard discusses other disciplines, including prayer, study, simplicity, worship, and others. Willard's text was not as widely received as those of Wallis or Foster, but became a standard text in Evangelical colleges and seminaries, so it is significant for its influence on the preaching and teaching ministries of Evangelical pastors, and thus, it's indirect influence on contemporary Evangelical churches and Christians. This Section will review Willard's theology of fasting.

5.4.3.1 Willard's theology of fasting

Willard places fasting into the category of 'disciplines of abstinence', juxtaposed against what he calls 'disciplines of engagement'. The disciplines of abstinence include, in addition to fasting: solitude, silence, frugality, chastity, secrecy, and sacrifice. The disciplines of engagement are study, worship, celebration, service, prayer, fellowship, confession, and submission (Willard 1990:158). Where Foster classifies disciplines prepositionally (inward, outward, corporate), Willard classifies them with verbs abstinence and engagement. Willard defines the disciplines of abstinence thus: 'In the disciplines of abstinence, we abstain to some degree and for some time from the satisfaction of what we generally regard as normal and legitimate desires' (Willard 1990:159). These desires can include human company, speech, acquisition of goods, sex, or in the case of fasting, food. Willard notes that:

the practices of abstention does not imply that there is anything essentially wrong with these desires as such. But in today's distorted condition of humanity, it is these basic desire that have been allowed to run a rebellious and harmful course, ultimately serving as the primary hosts of sin in our personalities.

(Willard 1990:160)

Where Foster sees fasting primarily as an aid to prayer and to intimacy with God, Willard presents a picture fasting as a means of training the Christian to keep the natural appetites in check; as a means of gaining Spirit-guided self-control:

This discipline teaches us a lot about ourselves very quickly. It will certainly prove humiliating to us, as it reveals to us how much our peace depends upon the pleasures of eating. It may also bring to mind how we are using food pleasure to assuage the discomforts caused in our bodies by faithless and unwise living and attitudes – lack of self-worth, meaningless work, purposeless existence, or lack of rest or exercise. If nothing else, though it will certainly demonstrate how powerful and clever our body is in getting its own way against our strongest resolves.

(Willard 1990:166)

For Willard, fasting is not simply a matter of piety; it is matter of virtue. Like Aquinas before him⁴⁴, Willard places fasting into the context of the cardinal virtue of temperance. He writes:

⁴⁴ See Murray (2010:17) for a discussion of Aquinas' theology of fasting.

Fasting teaches temperance or self-control and therefore teaches moderation and restraint with regard to *all* our fundamental drives. Since food has the pervasive place it does in our lives, the effects of fasting will be diffused throughout our personality. In the midst of all our needs and wants, we experience the contentment of the child that has been weaned from the mother's breast (Ps. 131:2). And 'Godliness with contentment is great gain.' (1 Tim. 6:6).

(Willard 1990:167-168, emphasis in the original)

Thus, for Willard, fasting is a means of practicing self-control over natural appetites, and is useful for developing the ability to resist temptation in other areas as well. It is clear that fasting is indeed a means of practicing abstention; of learning to be content even when one's physical desires are not satisfied. As Willard points out, fasting is part of the training that is essential for 'a sober and moderate use of all God's gifts' (Willard 1990:159). It is interesting to note that this function of fasting is not mentioned in either Testament, with the possible exception of the forty day fasts of Moses, Elijah, and Jesus. In these fasting texts, fasting is presented as a formative experience in the tradition of Jewish holy men. Otherwise, in the Bible, fasting is not depicted as a function of spiritual formation, but is related to some specific purpose, as discussed in chapters three and four of the present study. Willard, like Foster before him, has ascribed a significance to fasting which is perhaps intuitive, but is not explicitly found in the Bible. However, as noted in § 4.2.6 and 4.3 of this study, the New Testament seems to leave room for legitimate interpretations of fasting which are not contained in the New Testament accounts. The New Testament does not place fasting into a narrow and specific set of parameters, beyond the boundaries of which it would be considered 'unbiblical.' Rather, the 'new wineskin' of fasting may well absorb and grow with interpretations of fasting such as those offered by Foster and Willard. That is the subject of Chapter 6 of the present study.

5.4.4 Donald Whitney

Donald Whitney wrote *Spiritual disciplines for the Christian life* in 1991, to wide acceptance in the Evangelical community. It was published by the Navigators, an influential Evangelical publisher, and has become a widely used textbook in Evangelical colleges and seminaries. Whitney himself has held positions at Midwestern Baptist

Theological Seminary and Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, the latter being one of the largest and most influential seminaries among Evangelicals. For this reason, Whitney's text has influenced a generation of pastors in Evangelical churches. However, it is also widely purchased and read among Evangelical laypeople.

5.4.4.1 Whitney's theology of fasting

Whitney devotes twenty-one pages specifically to the discipline of fasting – more than Whitney and Willard combined. He begins with an overview of fasting, defining and explaining the practice of fasting in general terms, before moving on to a Biblical and theological discussion of fasting, followed by practical fasting guidance. It is Whitney's theology of fasting that is of concern here, and is outlined below.

Whitney, like Foster, addresses the question of whether fasting is required for the Christian. He takes a stronger stance on this question than Foster, stating that fasting is not required, but is expected.

By giving us instruction what to do and what not to do when we fast, Jesus assumes that we will fast... Jesus said that the time would come when His disciples 'will fast.' That time is now. Until Jesus, the Bridegroom of the Church returns, He expects us to fast.

(Whitney 1991:163)

Whitney, in a theme common to Evangelicals, does not assign legalistic requirements to fasting, but writes:

It's interesting that Jesus gives us no command regarding how often or how long we should fast. Just like all the other Spiritual Disciplines, fasting is not to be a legalistic routine. It is a privilege and an opportunity to seek God's grace that is open to us as often as we desire.

(Whitney 1991:164)

Whitney takes a much broader view of fasting than Foster or Willard. He lists ten reasons that a Christian might fast, citing examples for each from the Old Testament and New Testament. These reasons are:

- To strengthen prayer;
- to seek God's guidance;

- to express grief;
- to seek deliverance or protection;
- to express repentance and the return to God;
- to humble oneself before God;
- to express concern for the work of God;
- to minister to the needs of others;
- to overcome temptation and dedicate oneself to God; and
- to express love and worship to God (Whitney 1991:165-176).

Thus, Whitney does not see fasting as fulfilling a singular role in the life of a Christian, as, for example, Willard seems to interpret fasting only in the context of developing temperance. Whitney's universal approach to fasting takes into account various Biblical texts, but he emphasizes that fasting is not a universal panacea, or a 'magic pill' which accomplishes all these things in the life of a Christian. He writes: 'There are many purposes for fasting given in Scripture. I've condensed them into ten major categories. Whenever you fast, you should do so for at least one of these purposes (1991:165).' For Whitney, fasting may be done for any number of reasons, but must be practiced intentionally. Simply to fast does not accomplish all of the purposes he cites. The Christian should fast for one or more reasons specifically: 'without a purpose, fasting can be a miserable, self-centered experience (1991:165).'

5.4.5 Elmer Towns

Elmer Towns is perhaps second only to Bill Bright in bringing fasting to the forefront of Evangelical consciousness in the 1990's. Towns' book and tape series titled *Fasting for spiritual breakthrough: A guide to nine Biblical fasts* was widely distributed through the 'Old Time Gospel Hour' television program hosted by Reverend Jerry Falwell. Towns, a professor and dean of Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary, and a well-known author in Fundamentalist and Evangelical circles, has also been influential in the formation of thousands of Evangelical pastors. Thus, his theology of fasting is relevant to a contemporary Evangelical theology of fasting.

In his primary text (1996), Towns discusses nine Biblical fasts, which are listed below, along with brief descriptions.

- The disciples' fast – 'fasting for freedom from addiction (see Mat.. 17:20,21). If we fast, we can break the besetting sins that limit a life of freedom in Christ' (1996:5).
- The Ezra fast – 'fasting to solve problems (see Ezra 8:21-23). If we fast for a specific purpose, we may solve a debilitating problem' (1996:5).
- The Samuel fast – 'fasting to win people to Christ (see 1 Sam. 7:1-8). If we fast and pray for revival, God will pour Himself on his people' (1996:5).
- The Elijah fast – 'fasting to break crippling fears and other mental problems (see 1 Kings 19:2-18). Through fasting, God will show us how to overcome negative emotional and personal habits' (1996:5).
- The widow's fast – 'fasting to provide for the needy (see 1 Kings 17:12). When we sacrifice our own physical needs, God enables us to focus on and provide for the needs of others' (1996:6).
- The Saint Paul fast – 'fasting for insight and decision-making (see Acts 9:9-19). If we fast to subject our will to God's, He will reveal His will to us' (1996:6).
- The Daniel fast – 'fasting for health and physical healing (see Dan. 1:12-20). When we fast for physical well-being, God will touch our bodies and enrich our souls' (1996:6).
- The John the Baptist fast – 'fasting for an influential testimony (see Matt. 3:4; Luke 1:15). If we fast for the influence of our testimonies, God will use us' (1996:6).
- The Esther fast – 'fasting for protection from the evil one (see Esther 4:16). If we fast for protection and deliverance from Satan, God will deliver us from evil' (1996:6).

Towns clearly sees fasting as a functional discipline – that is, that fasting should bring about specific, usually tangible, results. He writes:

I want every Christian in the world to learn to fast – to fast properly – to fast for results. If every Christian fasted, the results could shake our society like a windstorm

bending a sapling. Christians would demonstrate that they live differently, that their faith is imperative, that the Almighty works in their daily lives. If all our churches fasted, they would move forward in evangelism and reach out in feeding and helping others. God would then pour His presence upon His people.

(Towns 1996:15)

For Towns, fasting should bring about specific results, but these results are not automatic. Rather, they are subject to the sovereign will of God. He writes:

Even if we wanted to, we could not manipulate God. We fast and pray for results, but the results are in God's hands. One of the greatest spiritual benefits of fasting is becoming more attentive to God – becoming more aware of our own inadequacies and His adequacy, our own contingencies and His self-sufficiency – and listening to what He wants us to be and do.

(Towns 1996:17-18)

5.4.5.1 Towns' theology of fasting

Towns' emphasis on the personal, spiritual, and often empirical, results of fasting is evident in his 1998 book *Fasting can change your life*, edited with Jerry Falwell. In this volume, Towns has compiled the testimonies of thirty-two Evangelical pastors and leaders who practiced fasting, and who attribute fasting to the attainment of specific goals. The goals include raising 50 million dollars, healing cancer, deliverance from drug addiction, the adoption of a child for an infertile couple, healing from stuttering, solving church financial problems, and leadership in the Southern Baptist Convention (1998:5-8). Contributors include pastors, denominational leaders, and Christian educators, many of whom are well-known in Evangelical circles, such as Jerry Falwell, D. James Kennedy, and Bill Bright, as well as lesser-known leaders. The point of the book is clear – fasting can bring about specific results in the life of a Christian or a church. God uses fasting to accomplish His goals in the lives of believers.

The most significant aspect of Towns' theology of fasting is that it is an accessory to prayer. Towns writes that Christians 'may fast when prayer is not enough to receive the answers we need (Towns 1998:11).' Towns interprets fasting in both testaments broadly; God's people fasted when they needed something from God, and were particularly urgent in their prayers. God responded to the fasting of his people by

providing deliverance, protection, wisdom, influence, healing, or whatever may have been needed.

It is hard not to discern a cause-and-effect relationship between prayer and fasting, on the one hand, and the answer to prayer, on the other, in Towns' theology. Given the diverse cross-section of Evangelical leaders who contributed their testimonies to the book, it seems that this view is widespread among Evangelicals. The clear implication is that fasting is the cause which God uses to bring about a desired effect; that prayer with fasting produces specific results in the life or ministry of the believer who fasts.

5.4.6 Bill Bright

The late Bill Bright was the founder of Campus Crusade for Christ, and a prominent Evangelical leader. He was widely influential as the author of several books and gospel tracts. In the mid-1990s, he began a fasting movement within Evangelicalism which influenced Towns and many other Evangelicals to explore fasting.

He recounts that on July 5th, 1994, he discerned the leadership of God to undertake a 40 day fast 'for a great spiritual awakening in America and for the fulfillment of the Great Commission throughout the world' (Towns 1996:7). Bright wrote several books and tracts about fasting, and convened a highly-attended prayer and fasting summit of Evangelical leaders in Saint Louis, Missouri in 1996.

Bright summarized the Biblical purposes of prayer and fasting in ten points, correlating each point with Scripture:

- To honor God (Matthew 6:16-18; Zechariah 7:5; Luke 2:37; Acts 13:2).
- To humble ourselves before God (Ezra 8:21; Psalm 69:10; Isaiah 58:3) in order to experience more grace (1 Peter 5:5) and God's intimate presence (Isaiah 57:15; 58:6-9).
- To mourn over personal sin and failure (1 Samuel 7:6; Nehemiah 9:1,2).
- To mourn over the sins of the church, nation, and world (1 Samuel 7:6; Nehemiah 9:1,2).
- To seek grace for a new task, for the work God has sent us to do, and to reaffirm our consecration to God (Matthew 4:2).
- To seek God by drawing near to him and persisting in prayer against opposing spiritual forces (Judges 20:26; Ezra 8:21, 23, 31; Jeremiah 29:12-14; Joel 2:12; Luke 18:3; Acts 9:10-19).

- To show repentance and so make a way for God to change his declared intentions of judgment (2 Samuel 12:16, 22; 1 Kings 21:27:29; Jeremiah 18:7,8; Joel 2:12-14; Jonah 3:5,10).
- To save people from bondage to evil (Isaiah 58:6; Matthew 17:14-21; Luke 4:1).
- To gain revelation and wisdom concerning God's will (Isaiah 58:5,6, 11; Daniel 9:3, 21, 22; Acts 13:2,3).
- To open the way for the outpouring of the Spirit and Christ's return to earth for His people (Matthew 9:15; 25:6; John 14:3).

(Bright 1997:195-196)

5.4.6.1 Bright's theology of fasting

Like several other Evangelical authors, Bright sees a correlation between the act of contrite fasting on the part of the believer, and a resulting action on the part of God. For Bright, the fasting of the church can influence national morality and politics, as well international missionary activity.

Bright also describes 'fasting in this age' in eschatological terms. Many Evangelical Christians are dispensational premillennialists, who see the return of Christ as immanent. Thus, fasting, as other spiritual practices, is performed in light of Christ's return to bring reward to His people and judgment to the world. Bright summarizes the eschatological nature of fasting with four points. Fasting is:

- A sign of the believer's longing for the Lord's return.
- A preparation for Christ's coming.
- A mourning of Christ's absence.
- A sign of sorrow for the sin and decay of the world (see Bright 1997:196)

5.5 A SYNTHETIC CONTEMPORARY EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY OF FASTING

From the preceding review of contemporary Evangelical fasting literature, several themes emerge which contribute to a synthetic theology of fasting in contemporary Evangelicalism. These are explained below.

- Fasting is not mandatory for the Christian. Evangelical authors place differing degrees of emphasis on the importance of fasting for Christian piety or spiritual formation, but none declare that fasting is a requirement. An Evangelical theology of fasting sees fasting as expected, but not required, by God.

- Fasting does not have a singular, fixed meaning among Evangelicals. Different authors see varying purposes for the discipline of fasting. Wallis and Towns see fasting as a means to spiritual power for specific purposes. Foster and Bright interpret fasting as an act of piety, leading to a closer relationship with God. Bright also sees fasting as an accessory to national and personal repentance. Willard places fasting into the context of training for godliness, while Whitney incorporates several of these possible interpretations. Thus, there is no single, monolithic Evangelical theology of fasting, as exists with certain other issues, such as the virgin birth, the deity of Christ, or the inerrancy of the Bible.
- Fasting must be intentional, and the success or merit of the fast is related to the motive of the one fasting. Evangelical authors are unanimous in their assertion that mechanical, passionless fasting does not move the heart or mind of God, nor create holiness or temperance in the one fasting. As with prayer, fasting relies on faith, repentance, and a desire for a meaningful experience with God (though the nature of this experience may vary from one author to the next).
- Fasting is often viewed by Evangelicals as a powerful accessory to prayer; as a means of adding moral weight to one's prayer for a specific movement of God. Many Evangelicals, such as Towns and Bright, and numerous contributors to their books, see a direct causal relationship between fasting and the actions of God which are perceived to follow.
- An interesting shift in Evangelical fasting literature occurred in the mid 1990's. Previously, authors (Wallis, Foster, Willard, Whitney) placed an emphasis on Biblical and theological principles of fasting. Later authors such as Towns, Falwell, Bright, and Floyd use the testimonial as a staple format. In addition to Biblical and theological instruction, these later fasting texts focus on the accounts of prominent Evangelical leaders who have fasted, and who perceive a causal relationship between fasting and some specific movement of God.
- Evangelicals often conflate the Israel of the Old Testament with the American church. Old Testament mandates to national repentance and fasting are frequently cited in calls to contemporary American Christians to fast, pray, and

repent on behalf of America. In this respect, elements of Evangelical nationalism are evident.

5.6 CONCLUSIONS

This Chapter has attempted to construct a synthetic contemporary Evangelical theology of fasting. It has placed the contemporary Evangelical movement into its historical, theological, and spiritual contexts, and has surveyed significant fasting literature among Evangelicals. From this survey, some elements of a synthetic Evangelical theology of fasting have been presented. In the Chapter that follows, this Evangelical theology of fasting will be juxtaposed against the New Testament theology of fasting presented in Chapter 4, with the goal of using a social-scientific interpretation of fasting in the New Testament as a tool for critical appraisal of fasting in contemporary Evangelicalism.

Chapter 6

Analysis, summary and conclusions

6.1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this Chapter is to compare the postulated New Testament theology of fasting presented in Chapter 4 with the contemporary Evangelical theology of fasting articulated in Chapter 5, with the goal of determining the extent to which a contemporary Evangelical theology of fasting conforms to a theology of fasting derived from a social-scientific interpretation of fasting in the New Testament. This Chapter will provide a summary of the current study, a critical comparison between the findings in Chapters 4 and 5 of the study, and recommendations for producing greater conformity between Evangelical fasting and the New Testament theology of fasting derived from social-scientific criticism. Directions for further study will be articulated.

6.2 SUMMARY OF THE STUDY

Chapter 1 introduced the subject of the thesis and attempted to narrow and delineate the parameters within which the subject would be examined. The method of research was articulated and justified, and the relevant literature was surveyed. Theological assumptions were disclosed and articulated, and their relevance to the present study stated. The direction of the remaining chapters was broadly indicated.

In Chapter 2 the history, methods, and assumptions of social-scientific criticism were discussed. Social-scientific criticism was defined, including the relationship of social-scientific models, such as structural functionalism, conflict, and symbolism, to the interpretation of the New Testament text. Social institutions relevant to the study and representative of the institutions studied by social-scientific critics were discussed, specifically the social institutions of honor and shame, individuality and collectivism, and limited good. Next, a brief literary history of the social-scientific method was outlined, from early applications of social science to the biblical text, to the discipline as currently expressed. Then social-scientific criticism was placed into the context of other

prominent contemporary hermeneutical methodologies, in order to provide a broader understanding of social-scientific criticism's place in the spectrum of options for the modern biblical critic. Finally the critical approach of the present study was articulated.

Chapter 3 presented an overview of fasting in the ancient world. It has noted that fasting was a nearly universal religious phenomenon in the ancient Mediterranean world, and has explored the connection between food and fasting and the greater whole of Mediterranean societies. A relatively detailed, though not comprehensive, study of fasting in the Old Testament has been presented, and a summary picture of Old Testament fasting has been articulated. Further, several areas of significance relating fasting in the Old Testament to the New Testament have been expressed, in anticipation of the next Chapter. An overview of fasting in ancient Mesopotamian and Greek cultures has provided a few parallels between these cultures and that of the Jews in the Old Testament, which contribute to the cultural and social world of the Gospels.

Chapter 4 attempted to provide a social-scientific interpretation of fasting in the New Testament. Critical fasting texts were examined with an eye toward articulating a coherent, synthetic New Testament theology of fasting. Significant aspects of this theology were expressed in short statements which summarize a theology of fasting based on social-scientific critical interpretation of New Testament texts. These findings are summarized in § 6.3 below.

Chapter Five 5 attempted to construct a synthetic contemporary Evangelical theology of fasting. It placed the contemporary Evangelical movement in its historical, theological, and spiritual contexts, and surveyed significant fasting literature among Evangelicals. From this survey, some elements of a synthetic Evangelical theology of fasting were presented. This theology is summarized in § 6.4, below.

6.3 SUMMARY OF A NEW TESTAMENT THEOLOGY OF FASTING

In summary, the social-scientific interpretation of fasting in the New Testament yields the following points in a New Testament theology of fasting:

- The New Testament does not provide rigid rules for fasting. Rather, fasting is fluid, taking the shape of the situation in which one fasts. The influence of the Old Testament is clearly evident, but new paradigms for fasting also emerge in the New Testament.
- Fasting in the New Testament may be ritualized or non-ritualized, but is more often depicted as ritualized.
- The New Testament depicts both corporate and private fasting. Jesus fasted privately, and he and his disciples abstained from public, corporate fasts.
- Fasting in the New Testament is usually voluntary.
- Fasting in the New Testament may be undertaken for a variety of reasons.
- Fasting in the New Testament has clear eschatological significance (fasting in anticipation of the return or the presence of Christ).
- Fasting is not described in the New Testament as a means of attaining holiness, but rather as one sign of a holy life, alongside others, such as prayer, repentance, and almsgiving.
- Fasting to gain honor is expressly denounced in the New Testament.
- Jesus implies that fasting may be reinterpreted by his followers (i.e., new wineskins).
- Fasting may be a means of gaining spiritual authority or an aid in resisting temptation to sin.
- The early church practiced fasting in some contexts, but not others. When the early church fasted, it was to determine and confirm the will of God, though fasting was not always employed in seeking God's will.
- The early church always practiced fasting as an accessory to prayer. Fasting is not depicted apart from prayer in Acts.
- Fasting is not mentioned in the New Testament letters. This may lead one to question the significance of fasting in the life of the early church.

6.4 SUMMARY OF A CONTEMPORARY EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY OF FASTING

An analysis of contemporary Evangelical authors on fasting yields the following main tenets of an Evangelical theology of fasting.

- Fasting is not mandatory for the Christian. Evangelical authors place differing degrees of emphasis on the importance of fasting for Christian piety or spiritual formation, but none declare that fasting is a requirement. An Evangelical theology of fasting sees fasting as expected, but not required, by God.
- Fasting does not have a singular, fixed meaning among Evangelicals. Different authors see varying purposes for the discipline of fasting. Wallis and Towns see fasting as a means to spiritual power for specific purposes. Foster and Bright interpret fasting as an act of piety, leading to a closer relationship with God. Bright also sees fasting as an accessory to national and personal repentance. Willard places fasting into the context of training for godliness, while Whitney incorporates several of these possible interpretations. Thus, there is no single, monolithic Evangelical theology of fasting, as exists with certain other issues, such as the virgin birth, the deity of Christ, or the inerrancy of the Bible.
- Fasting must be intentional, and the success or merit of the fast is related to the motive of the one fasting. Evangelical authors are unanimous in their assertion that mechanical, passionless fasting does not move the heart or mind of God, nor create holiness or temperance in the one fasting. As with prayer, fasting relies on faith, repentance, and a desire for a meaningful experience with God (though the nature of this experience may vary from one author to the next).
- Fasting is often viewed by Evangelicals as a powerful accessory to prayer; as a means of adding moral weight to one's prayer for a specific movement of God. Many Evangelicals, such as Towns and Bright, and numerous contributors to their books, see a direct causal relationship between fasting and the actions of God which are perceived to follow.
- An interesting shift in Evangelical fasting literature occurred in the mid-1990s. Previously, authors (Wallis, Foster, Willard, Whitney) placed an emphasis on Biblical and theological principles of fasting. Later authors such as Towns, Falwell, Bright, and Floyd use the testimonial as a staple format. In addition to Biblical and theological instruction, these later fasting texts focus on the accounts of prominent Evangelical leaders who have fasted, and who perceive a causal relationship between fasting and some specific movement of God.

- Evangelicals often conflate the Israel of the Old Testament with the American church. Old Testament mandates to national repentance and fasting are frequently cited in calls to contemporary American Christians to fast, pray, and repent on behalf of America. In this respect, elements of Evangelical nationalism are evident.

6.5 FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The table below provides a visual comparison between the New Testament theology of fasting presented in Chapter 4, and the contemporary Evangelical theology of fasting presented in Chapter 5. Following this, explanation is provided.

Table 6.1: Comparison of fasting theologies

Subject	New Testament	Evangelicalism
Reasons for fasting	A believer may fast for any number of reasons.	A believer may fast for any number of reasons.
Meaning of fasting	Fasting may be open to new paradigms and meanings.	The meaning of fasting may be subjective, between the believer and God.
Participants in fasting	Fasting may be corporate or private.	Fasting may be corporate or private. Private fasting is usually undertaken for reasons pertaining to one's own spiritual experience, whereas corporate fasting is undertaken for the nation or the church.
Obligation for fasting	Fasting is voluntary for followers of Christ, but it is implied that fasting is expected.	Fasting is voluntary. Many Evangelicals believe that fasting should be undertaken in response to a call to fast, either by God or by church leaders.
Eschatological reasons for fasting	Fasting carries eschatological undertones.	Fasting is seen by some Evangelicals as a means of anticipating Christ's return.
Fasting and holiness	Fasting is a sign of holiness, accompanied by other signs.	Fasting may be a means of attaining holiness.
Fasting and honor	Fasting is not for personal honor.	Fasting is not for personal honor, though prominent Evangelicals who fast are frequently honored publically.

Fasting and causality	No causal relationship is implied between fasting and God's response.	Fasting is frequently seen as a cause of specific responses on God's part.
Fasting and authority	Fasting may be a means to gain spiritual authority over demonic forces.	Fasting may be a means to gain spiritual authority over demonic forces.
Fasting and prayer	Fasting is inseparable from prayer.	Fasting is inseparable from prayer.
Fasting and God's will	Fasting may be a means of determining and confirming God's will.	Fasting may be a means of determining and confirming God's will.
Fasting and national repentance	Fasting by Jewish Christians for national repentance is not presented in the New Testament.	Fasting by American Christians for national repentance is a common theme among Evangelicals.
Fasting and physical health	Fasting may provide spiritual authority over physical illness.	Fasting may be a means of healing, either for the one fasting, or for others.
Fasting and culture	Religious fasting was a part of the culture of the New Testament (second-temple Judaism).	Religious fasting is not a prominent part of American culture.
Fasting and food	Fasting is always presented as abstention from food.	Some Evangelicals allow fasting from things other than food.

6.6 INTERPRETATION

The goal of the present study is to evaluate fasting in contemporary Evangelical literature in the light of the social-scientific interpretation of fasting in the New Testament presented in Chapter 4. Thus, the social and cultural context of Evangelicalism must also be considered. Robert Bellah commented on the dangers and difficulties inherent in comparing and contrasting the worlds of the Bible and of modern man:

I would like to begin with the assertion that the assumptions of social science are the assumptions of the modern world. They came into existence together and are indissolubly interlinked. A critique of social science cannot but be simultaneously a critique of modern society and vice versa. Biblical religion has not been extruded from the modern world, though many of the prophets of modernity predicted that it would be. But biblical religion has certainly been pushed to the periphery, especially in the intellectual world where modernity has enjoyed its greatest triumphs. In some respects we can even say that in contemporary society social science has usurped the traditional position of theology. It is now social science that tells us what kind of creatures we are and what we are about on this planet. It is social science that provides us images of personal behavior and legitimations of the structures that govern us. It is to social science that the task is entrusted, so far as it is entrusted at

all, of, in whatever the contemporary terms for it would be, "justifying the ways of God to man."

(Bellah 1981:8)

In creating a juxtaposition of fasting in the biblical world with that of fasting in contemporary Evangelicalism, there is a risk of imposing the values of one culture on another, and weighing the merits of a given culture's interpretation of fasting on the basis of its conformity to that of a foreign culture. However, as Evangelical Christians seek to base their Christian faith, both in terms of orthodoxy and orthopraxy, on the New Testament, such juxtaposition cannot be avoided in a study such as the current one. The risks of cultural anachronism can be mitigated, however, by the use of a third element of comparison; a vantage point which transcends both cultures under consideration, and which can be found in the two anthropological dichotomies of shame-based versus guilt-based cultures, and the concepts of ceremony and ritual in religious observances.

Two anthropological dichotomies provide a useful paradigm for interpreting the different theological emphases in fasting from the New Testament to the contemporary Evangelical church. These dichotomies illustrate the differences between the contemporary Evangelical worldview and that of the New Testament. Because of these vastly different perspectives, Evangelicals fast for different reasons than those found in the New Testament. The first dichotomy is that between shame-based and guilt-based cultures. The second dichotomy is that between ritual and ceremony. These dichotomies are discussed below. Additionally, a biblical paradigm will be considered which may allow for, if not the reconciliation of Eastern and Western (New Testament and Evangelical) fasting, at least a hermeneutic which allows Evangelicals to interpret fasting in a way that is faithful to the *ethos* of the New Testament.

6.6.1 The shame/guilt dichotomy

Missiologists and anthropologists make a distinction between shame-based cultures and guilt-based cultures. Eugene Nida, in the 1950s, described shame-based, guilt-based and fear-based cultures based on cultural reactions to moral transgressions

(Nida 1954:150; see also Kasdorf 1980:111-115; Hesselgrave 1983:461-483; Wiher 2003). One way to distinguish between shame-based and guilt-based cultures is that 'shame cultures rely on external sanctions for good behavior', whereas guilt cultures rely on 'an internalized conviction of sin' (Benedict 1946:223). In shame-based cultures, people are concerned with the preservation of honor in the eyes of others, whereas in guilt-based cultures people are concerned with conformity to an internal authority (though this internal sanction is usually based on something external, such as a moral code). This distinction is by no means absolute. Creighton (1990:285) notes that there are elements of guilt in shame-based cultures. An external observer is not necessary to produce a sense of shame at a moral violation, as the idea of an observer, real or imaginary, is often internalized. Thus, a member of a shame-based culture may feel shame at sin, even when he or she has not been publically shamed. Likewise, in a guilt-based culture, a person may feel shamed at the public exposure of sin. It is a generalization, but a fair one, to say that in shame-based cultures the goal is the preservation of one's honor (personally, or the honor of one's dyad), whereas in guilt-based cultures, the goal is the preservation (or justification) of one's innocence.

Bechtel notes that:

shame stipulates fear of psychological or physical rejection (lack of belonging), abandonment, expulsion, or loss of social position and relies predominantly on external pressure from an individual or group.... guilt is a response to a transgression against internalized societal or parental prohibitions or against boundaries that form an internal authority, the conscience.

(Bechtel 1994:80)

The culture of the first-century Mediterranean world is a shame-based culture, concerned with the preservation of honor (see § 2.3.1). In contrast, Evangelicalism is rooted in a Western, guilt-based worldview. The present social-scientific interpretation of New Testament fasting texts reveals some honor – and shame-based aspects of fasting. Many of these shame-based perspectives on fasting are foreign to the Western Evangelical perspective. For this reason, Evangelicals often articulate reasons for fasting which are quite different than those found in the New Testament.

Fasting in the New Testament is often portrayed in the context of shame for sin (personal or national), in an attempt to restore honor. Evangelicals do not tend to share this shame-based perspective, but rather have a guilt-based perspective. Fasting is rarely related to repentance for sin among Evangelicals, possibly because Evangelicals, embracing grace, resist the concept of penance for sin. An Eastern person may see fasting as a means of restoring honor after having received the shame of sin, but an Evangelical will not see fasting as a means of expunging the guilt of sin, because in Evangelical theology sin is properly expiated only by the grace of God, mediated through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and attained in a spirit of humble repentance and faith. In the Evangelical mind, fasting as a means of cleansing one's guilt for sin is reminiscent of a works-based view of righteousness, and is rejected.

A variation on this theme may be found in some Evangelicals' view of fasting for national repentance. Some Evangelicals (notably Bright) have called for Christians to fast for America's national sins, such as abortion and homosexuality. This is in some ways similar to Jewish fasting on the Day of Atonement, but with a key distinction: Evangelicals who fast for national repentance are not fasting to purge their own guilt for personal sin, but are fasting for the movement of God to bring others to repentance. National fasting in Israel was an act of intentionally dishonoring oneself in response to the shame of sin, whereas national fasting as envisioned by many Evangelicals is an attempt to produce repentance, which will erase the guilt of sin.

Another implication of the shame/guilt dichotomy is that in the culture of the New Testament, fasting tends to have a more public face than in contemporary Evangelicalism. The Pharisee in Luke 19:9-14 can publically declare his fasting habits, because in his culture fasting which was not public could not acquire honor, since shame and honor are public judgments rendered by the community at large. Evangelicals tend to place a greater emphasis on fasting privately, pointing to Jesus' injunction in Matthew 6 that fasting be done in the presence of God, for God alone to reward.

6.6.2 The ritual/ceremony dichotomy

The second dichotomy which may be helpful in the present discussion is that between ritual and ceremony in religious observance. Rituals and ceremonies are found in the Judaism which forms the social and cultural backdrop for the gospels, in the Judaic and Gentile Christianity which frames the broader context of the New Testament, and within contemporary Evangelicalism. The question for the present study is whether fasting should properly be viewed as a ritual or as a ceremony, or if fasting may be either, depending on its context or a number of other variables. It is to this question that we now turn.

A ritual is a religious observance which is recurrent within a religious tradition, which is reminiscent of significant events in the history of religion, and which carries with it the prospect of changing the status of those who participate. One author summarizes the significance of rituals in religious observance:

[W]hile ritual at least represents routine, it tends, historically speaking, to have a far deeper significance for the religious consciousness. A recurrent feature of religion, which many student of its phenomena would even consider constant and typical, is the attribution of a more or less self-contained and automatic efficacy to the ritual as such.... Firstly, there is the tendency to pass beyond the purely petitionary attitude which as such can imply no more than the desire, hope or expectation of divine favor, and to take for granted the consummation sought, a deity that answers, a grace and blessing that are communicated. When such accomplishment of its end is assumed, efficacy can readily be held to attach to the act of worship as such. Secondly, there is the tendency to identify such a self-accomplishing act of worship with its objective expression in the ritual that for purposes of mutual understanding makes the body of worshippers one.

(Brittanica 1963:322-323)

A ritual, then, is a religious action which, when performed properly, or with the proper attitude (faith, repentance, etc.), contains within itself the means of a status transformation for the worshipper or body of worshippers who participate in the ritual. Ellwood describes the function of ritual within religious observance:

By ritualization is meant the establishment of behavior that repeats, although often in a curtailed manner, an act that was once extremely significant. Because the behavior is condensed – only a token gesture in the direction what it once was – it

can be called symbolic; it satisfies the feelings that once adhered in the original act but does not need to go all the way in repeating it.

(Ellwood 1978:29)

Ellwood further elaborates that 'the ritual repetition of keys to the religion's spiritual meaning is essential to unveiling the larger meaning of the past. The further meaning is that the past evoked a sacred time, when a special divine power and wisdom were available (1978:107).'

Several fasts found in the Old and New Testament falls under the category of rituals. The fast of the Day of Atonement, for example, was an annual ritual ordained by YHWH as a time of national remembrance and repentance. It effected a status change for the nation of Israel by bringing about atonement for their sins. The fasts of the fifth and seventh months discussed in Zechariah 7 and 8 commemorate in ritual form the death of Gedaliah (§ 3.2.12). A New Testament example of ritualized fasting may perhaps be found in Mark 2:18-20 and its parallel passage in Luke 5:33-35. Though a specific ritual context is not provided, both the Pharisees and the disciples of John the Baptist were fasting, and Jesus' lack of fasting was conspicuous, which indicates the expectation that observant Jews should be fasting. For a more detailed discussion of ritualized fasting, see § 4.1.1.

Evangelicals as a rule do not observe rituals to as great an extent as many other Christian groups. Sterling observed that while Evangelicals from the time of the Reformation have rejected ritualism, there is an emerging trend among Evangelicals to observe such rituals as Ash Wednesday and Lent, and the use of the lectionary to reflect 'the unity of the church and facilitates a move out of sectarianism to be part of the larger Church' (Sterling 2009:37). However, Sterling notes only a trend toward an Evangelical embrace of traditional Christian rituals in corporate worship, not in private devotion. Evangelical authors do not promote fasting in terms of ritual to commemorate significant historical events, nor do they speak of fasting in terms of changing the status of the observer. Rather, Evangelical authors generally refer to private fasting for spiritual formation or to lend urgency to prayer, and corporate fasting is usually referred to in two

contexts: fasting and prayer for national (usually American) repentance, and for the meeting of a specific, immediate need (for example, to raise money or to heal a key individual) of the church. There is also a tendency in Evangelical literature to promote fasting at the direction of an inner movement of God in the life of the believer – the ‘call to fast’ – rather than fasting on specific holy days. Fasting is spontaneous, rather than ritualized. Thus, it may be said that ritualized fasting is not a common aspect of Evangelical fasting.

Religious ceremonies, as a counterpart to religious rituals, commemorate a significant event, but do not carry the ability to change the status of the observer. Corporate worship, for example, may be considered a ceremony. Evangelical Christians gather weekly for worship to celebrate the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, but do not generally believe that participation in this worship changes their status before God or one another. They believe that it is the grace of God extended to the believer on the basis of his or her faith, rather than participation in a religious ceremony, which changes the status of a person from death to life, or from darkness to light. Evangelical authors do not promote what may be called ‘ceremonial’ fasting – fasting which would represent significant religious meaning, but without affecting change in the individual.

Evangelicals generally do not use the terms ‘ritual’ or ‘ceremony’ to describe fasting, but rather, place fasting into a third category, namely ‘spiritual discipline.’ Fasting for Evangelicals is usually a private act of devotion, rather than an act of corporate worship. This distinction is vital for understanding a fundamental difference between fasting in the New Testament and fasting in contemporary Evangelicalism. In the honor-driven and dyad-focused context of the first-century Mediterranean world, fasting requires an audience, and takes place in a social context. Fasting says something about one’s quotient of honor and his or her place in the broader social context. By contrast, Evangelicals tend to be, as a product of Western culture, individualists. Fasting is a private act (it might, in fact, be invalidated by the presence of an audience), an inward discipline which has an effect on the individual who practices it. Rituals and ceremonies are, for the most part (but not exclusively) public observances, while Evangelicals tend

to view fasting as a private act, the utility of which is generally limited to the individual who practices it.

6.7 RECONCILIATION

These cultural dichotomies make a biblical/Evangelical theology of fasting difficult, but not irreconcilable. Jesus himself provided a paradigm for constructing a theology of fasting which may honor the spirit of the New Testament scriptures, in a culture that is quite different from that of the first-century Mediterranean world. In Matthew 9:15-17, in response to a question about fasting, Jesus said:

The attendants of the bridegroom cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast. But no one puts a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; for the patch pulls away from the garment, and a worse tear results. Nor do *people* put new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the wineskins burst, and the wine pours out and the wineskins are ruined; but they put new wine into fresh wineskins, and both are preserved.

The interpretation of this pericope is in some ways ambiguous, but one thing is clear: Jesus speaks of fasting in the time of his absence, in anticipation of his return, as different from fasting in His own time and culture. Just as a new patch is not sewn on old cloth, or new wine poured into old wineskins, Jesus anticipates a time when fasting (though fasting is not the only application of this text) is not bound by the cultural milieu in which he and his followers lived. As noted in § 4.3, the New Testament does not present a single, hard and fast view of fasting. Rather, Jews and Christians are presented as fasting in a variety of contexts, for a variety of reasons.

Jesus' reference to new cloth and new wineskins speaks to the transcultural nature of His gospel. Jesus proclaimed himself the Jewish Messiah, sent from God the Father to the Jews in a specific social and cultural context, but He did not limit the application of His gospel to that context. That his followers understood the gospel to be universal is evident from the inclusion of other groups in the church, including Samaritans (Acts 8:5-25), gentiles (Acts 10:47-48), and an Ephesian cult of men following the baptism of John the Baptist (Acts 19:1-7). In each example above, the Book of Acts depicts the group as having received the Holy Spirit, just as the Jewish believers did in Acts 2.

At the Jerusalem council, the apostles took up the question of gentile conversion. Having deliberated on the relationship between gentiles who wished to follow Jesus Christ, and Jews who were disciples of Jesus, the apostles issued a minimal code of conduct, intended primarily to reduce social and cultural friction between Jews and gentiles. Interestingly, three of the four injunctions are food-related:

It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things.

(Ac 15:28-29)

Jesus' immediate followers did not place significant requirements on converts from other cultures, save those which would cause the most offense to Jews (basic dietary restrictions) and sexual immorality. One may deduce from this, in the context of Jesus' reference to new cloth and new wineskins in Matthew 9, that there is room within the gospel for members of various cultures to express their faith and devotion to Christ within the contexts of their cultures. Early gentile Christians were not expected to conform to the constraints of Judaic Christianity.

To apply this concept to fasting is not a great leap. Just as western Evangelical Christians observe a different style of worship from the Jews of the first-century Mediterranean world, different moral codes, and a different worldview, so also it is to be expected that they will fast differently, and for different reasons, and expect different sequelae from their fasting experience. By not attaching a rigid meaning to fasting, the New Testament leaves room for cultural interpretations of practices of fasting, in addition to such acts as prayer, worship, almsgiving, observation of the ordinances, and church government.

Thus it may be concluded that while Evangelicals articulate a theology of fasting which is not, strictly speaking, 'biblical' (in the sense of conforming to the specific paradigms of the Old and/or New Testaments), it may yet conform to the spirit of the gospel, and be a culturally-appropriate expression of devotion, piety, and faith. Indeed, in reviewing the

broad themes of Evangelical fasting literature, it is difficult to find much with which to disagree in broad terms: fasting is an act of worship and devotion, intended to lend urgency to prayer, to gain spiritual authority for the spread of the gospel, to bring repentance for sin, to gain self-control over temptation, to bring about healing or deliverance, and to place the things of God into a higher priority than the things of the world. One may not find fasting fulfilling all these roles in the social and cultural context of the New Testament, but two points may be argued with little dispute:

1. these intentions are worthy goals for any Christian to pursue, and;
2. fasting has been presented in Evangelical literature as an appropriate means of pursuing these goals. Evangelical authors, for the most part, have articulated a clear case for the utility of fasting in the fulfillment of these goals.

It seems that Evangelicals have pressed fasting into service in the pursuit of holy and honorable Christian piety and conduct, though in ways not found explicitly articulated in the New Testament. It seems, as well, that Jesus anticipated just such creativity when He discussed fasting in His absence in terms of new paradigms, new cloth, and new wineskins. Thus, Evangelical fasting may be said to conform to the *ethos* of the gospel as presented in the New Testament, and thus, to be a valid expression of biblical Christianity.

It is the author's contention that Evangelical Christians have the liberty, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and with the use of good judgment, to interpret fasting in ways that make it meaningful for the culture in which they live.

6.8 DIRECTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

The present study examined fasting in the New Testament from a social-scientific perspective, and articulated a New Testament theology of fasting on that basis. Additionally, the present study explored an Evangelical theology of fasting based on contemporary popular Evangelical literature. These theologies were juxtaposed, and points of comparison drawn between the two. There are several directions for further

study which could be undertaken in future research. Some of these are articulated below.

- The relationship between fasting in Evangelicalism and in other Christian traditions should receive attention. Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, for instance, have strong fasting traditions which have emerged over the last two millennia. How does an Evangelical theology of fasting compare with a Catholic theology of fasting?
- The relationship between fasting in the New Testament and fasting in other religious traditions is a subject ripe for exploration. Judaism and Islam both practice fasting in the context of a monotheistic religion, and fasting is practiced in polytheistic religions such as Hinduism, and in non-theistic religions, such as some schools of Buddhism and Taoism. Do Christians fast for the same reasons as believers in other religions? Do they fast with the same goals in mind?
- The place of fasting in the greater context of Evangelical spirituality could be examined. How does fasting fit into broader subjects of concern in Evangelicalism, such as evangelism, worship, preaching, and discipleship, beyond the contexts presented in the present study?
- It would also be useful to explore the use of social-scientific critical methods among Evangelicals. Most authors in social-scientific criticism seem to have a decidedly liberal theological bent, yet Evangelicals take the study of the Scriptures very seriously. Why has social-scientific criticism not taken greater hold among Evangelicals? Is it the simple entrenchment of the grammatical-historical method and the force of inertia which prevents more Evangelicals from undertaking social-scientific criticism, or is social-scientific criticism inherently 'unevangelical'?
- The relationship between rituals, ceremonies, and disciplines (as Evangelicals use the term) would provide further insight into the distinctions between categories of religious experience and observance, and may serve as a useful point of comparison between Evangelical Christians and non-western Christian traditions.

- Along with fasting, Evangelicals practice many other spiritual disciplines, including prayer, worship, financial giving, meditation, journaling, silence, solitude, rest, and service. It would be interesting to apply social-scientific criticism to these other prominent disciplines, as the present study has done with fasting.

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