

Going Old Testament with Your Tithe

When we think about tithing today, we often picture ourselves giving ten percent of our paycheck to a local church. Sometimes that involves making a [donation through a mobile app](#), sometimes it's dropping a check in the plate as it's getting passed by.

Either way, we tend to think of tithing as a practice of giving money. But how did tithing work in the Old Testament, when it began? You might be surprised to know that:

- People more often donated grain, wine, and animals than money. (They *could* give cash, but that was a little more expensive.)
- Those donations didn't just go to the clergy of the times—some went to the community, and some was eaten as a feast.
- The people of Israel may have given anywhere from ten percent to twenty-three percent of their income!

There's a lot we can learn about [how tithing worked in Bible times](#), so we put together an infographic to illustrate. [Check it out—and if you know anyone who would get a kick out of this information, please share!](#)

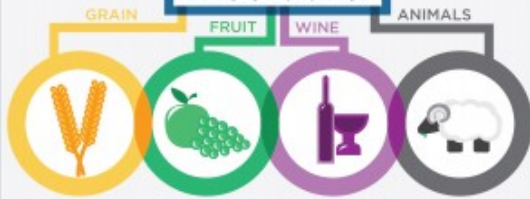
HOW TITHING WORKED IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

10%

"Tithing" usually means "tenth," and it's often the word we apply to any form of offering (donations) made to their church. But the meaning of giving a tenth of one's earnings to God comes from the Old Testament law. Let's explore what tithing meant to an ancient Israelite.

WHAT DID ISRAEL TITHE?

We're used to giving 10% of our paycheck, but Israel originally donated a tenth of the materials they earned. This meant that, instead of giving money, they would give:



WHO GAVE THE TITHES?



The nation of Israel was made up of 12 tribes—each was descended from one of the 12 sons of Jacob. Of those tribes, 11 of them were given a territory in the Promised Land. Only one tribe received no land: the tribe of Levi.



The 11 tribes gave tithes from their livestock and produce, and the Levites received some of those tithes. Then the Levites tithed, too. They would give 10% for the Lord's portion (which the high priest's family oversaw).



Gave 10% → Also Gave 10%

WHAT WERE TITHES USED FOR?

The Bible specifies several uses for the tithes.



For you!
 God tells Israel to eat their tithes as a celebration made at the tabernacle or temple, similar to the American Thanksgiving. (Dt 14:22-27)



For Levites
 Moses teaches Israel to give a tithe to the Levites. Some of this ended up in the Temple Treasury. (Neh 10:37-38)



For the community
 Every third year, there was a tithe that went to each town's widows, orphans, foreigners, and Levites. (Dt 14:28-29)

WAIT—THREE TITHES?

Maybe, maybe not.

There are a few theories about how those tithes played out.

TOTAL ANNUAL GIVING WAS 10%

It may have been that the Israelites tithed twice a year on half their income. In this scenario, 5% of their income would go to the Levites and 5% of their income would go toward the feast. Every three years, the feast tithe would go toward the community instead.

TOTAL ANNUAL GIVING WAS 23%

God expected his people to be very generous: 10% of their annual earnings went to the overarching Lord, 10% went to the Levites, and every third year, another 10% went to the community. This would average out to about 23% of an Israelite's income given every year.

BUT DID IT TAKE?

Israel was not consistent when it came to tithing. There are a few times in the Bible when leaders, such as Hezekiah and Nehemiah, bring tithing back into practice for a while (2 Ch 31:6; Neh 10:32), but by Malachi's time, tithes had been neglected (Mal 3:6).

However, tithing was a matter of the heart, not just a matter of bringing some grain to the temple. Jesus taught that even if you tithed on everything—right down to the garden herbs—but didn't practice more important parts of the law, like justice, mercy, and faithfulness, you were a hypocrite. (Mt 23:23; Lk 11:42)



> [Read more from Derek.](#)

Would you like to learn more about the tithe and generosity in your church? [Connect with an Auxano Navigator and start a conversation with our team.](#)