

Nehemiah 10: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Nehemiah chapter 10. On the seals are the names of Nehemiah the governor, the son of Hacaliah, Zedekiah, Sariah, Azariah, Jeremiah, Pasha, Amariah, Malkijah, Hattash, Shebaniah, Malak, Harim, Merimoth, Obadiah, Daniel, Ginnathon, Beiruch, Meshulam, Abijah, Midjamin, Meaziah, Bilgai, Shemaiah. These are the priests. And the Levites, Jeshua the son of Azaniah, Binuai of the sons of Henadad, Kadmiel, and their brothers Shebaniah, Hodiah, Kalita, Peliah, Hanan, Micah, Rehob, Hashabiah, Zakah, Sherabiah, Shebaniah, Hodiah, Bani, Benaynu, the chiefs of the people, Perosh, Pehathmoab, Elam, Zatu, Bani, Bani, Asgad, Bibai, Adonijah, Bigvi, Aden, Ata, Hezekiah, Azah, Hodiah, Hashem, Bezai, Harith, Anathoth, Nebai, Magpiash, Meshulam, Hesiah, Meshazabel, Zadok, Jadda, Pelatiah, Hanan, Aniah, Hoshea, Hananiah, Hashab, Haloehesh, Pilha, Shobek, Reham, Hashabna, Maaseah, Ahiah, Hanan, Anan, Malak, Harim, Beanna, the rest of the people, the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, the temple servants, and all who have separated themselves from the peoples of the lands to the law of God, their wives, their sons, their daughters, all who have knowledge and understanding, join with their brothers, their nobles, and enter into a curse and an oath to walk in God's law that was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the Lord our Lord, and his rules and his statutes. We will not give our daughters to the peoples of the land, or take their daughters for our sons. And if the peoples of the land bring in goods or any grain on the Sabbath day to sell, we will not buy from them on the Sabbath or on a holy day, and we will forego the crops of the seventh year and the exaction of every debt. We also take on ourselves the obligation to give yearly a third part of a shekel for the service of the house of our God, for the showbread, the regular grain offering, the regular burnt offering, the Sabbaths, the new moons, the appointed feasts, the holy things, and the sin offerings to make atonement for Israel, and for all the work of the house of our God. We, the priests, the Levites, and the people, have likewise cast lots for the wood offering, to bring it into the house of our God, according to our fathers' houses at times appointed, year by year, to burn on the altar of the Lord our God, as it is written in the law. We obligate ourselves to bring the firstfruits of our ground, and the firstfruits of all fruit of every tree, year by year, to the house of the Lord. Also to bring to the house of our God, to the priests who minister in the house of our God, the firstborn of our sons, and of our cattle, as it is written in the law, and the firstborn of our herds, and of our flocks, and to bring the first of our dough, and our contributions, the fruit of every tree, the wine and the oil, to the priests, to the chambers of the house of our God, and to bring to the Levites the tithes from our ground. For it is the Levites who collect the tithes in all our towns where we labour. And the priest, the son of Aaron, shall be with the Levites when the Levites receive the tithes, and the Levites shall bring up the tithe of the tithes to the house of our God, to the chambers of the storehouse. For the people of Israel and the sons of Levi shall bring the contribution of grain, wine, and oil to the chambers, where the vessels of the sanctuary are, as well as the priests who minister, and the gatekeepers and the singers. We will not neglect the house of our God.

On the twenty-fourth day of the seventh month, the people had gathered together to confess their sins, and to make a firm covenant in writing before the Lord. After the long prayer of confession and petition to the Lord in chapter 9, in chapter 10 we have the firm covenant itself, and the list of the people who were signatories to it. Nehemiah and Zedekiah top the list. Nehemiah is the governor, and Zedekiah, who might be identified with Zadok the scribe in chapter 13 verse 13, is another official.

A list of the priests who committed themselves to the document are found in verses 2 to 8. There is considerable overlap between the names mentioned here, and the names that we see in Nehemiah chapter 12 verses 1 to 7, and 12 to 22. James Jordan has used the close similarities between the

names on the two lists to argue that the signing of the covenant occurred at a time when many of those who had returned with Zerubbabel, mentioned in chapter 12, were still living. This very much goes against the conventional chronology, for which the events here are dated some 60 years later. Those that follow more conventional dating generally argue that the names that we have here are the names of ancestral houses, not of individuals. Zeriah, for instance, was not a living individual. He was high priest when Judah was taken into exile. His name represents those who are descended from him. The names that do not match with the names that we see in Nehemiah chapter 12 might be of persons contemporary with Nehemiah, who were leaders of their own households, but within larger houses that did not sign up to the covenant. The names of the Levites that follow in verses 9 to 13 seem to be of persons living at the time. Most of the names mentioned here are also mentioned in chapters 8 and 9 as persons who assisted in the reading of the law and in the ceremony that had preceded the sealing of this document. Jeshua, Binui, or Beni, and Kadmiel had headed the list of the Levites in chapter 9 verses 4 and 5, and just as they had led the group of the Levites there, they head the list of the Levites committed to the covenant document here. The 44 names of the chiefs of the people that followed may also include ancestral names, in addition to the names of persons still living, and perhaps also the names of cities like Anathoth. Once again, there are many similarities to be observed between this list and the list of the first returnees from Babylon in Ezra chapter 2 verses 3 to 20. Many of the names mentioned here are also mentioned in the list of the builders of the wall in Nehemiah chapter 3, along with the two officials, the priests, the Levites, and the chiefs of the people, the rest of the people who do not seal the document themselves, also bind themselves to the observance of the covenant with a curse and an oath, committing themselves to the law of Moses. This renewal of the covenant goes hand in hand with their commitment to set themselves apart from the peoples of the lands that surround them. The rest of the chapter gives the stipulations of the covenant that they have bound themselves to, as in the book of

Ezra, one of the chief concerns is to avoid intermarriage with pagan neighbours. The compromising effect that such intermarriage could have was already manifest in the influence that Tobiah the Ammonite had within the community, on account of the intermarriage of his family with leading figures.

[6 : 52] The commitment here goes back to the covenant of Sinai itself, in Exodus chapter 34 verses 12 to 16, for instance. Take care lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land to which you go, lest it become a snare in your midst. You shall tear down their altars and break their pillars and cut down their asherim, for you shall worship no other god, for the Lord whose name is Jealous is a jealous god, lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land. And when they whore after their gods and sacrifice their gods, and you are invited, you eat of his sacrifice, and you take of their daughters for your sons, and their daughters whore after their gods, and make your sons whore after their gods.

The second commitment of the covenant is to keeping the Sabbath and the Sabbath year. It seems as though the people of the surrounding lands were bringing in goods and grain into the city to sell on the Sabbath day. They were encouraged to do so because the people were buying their wares. The people now commit themselves not to engage in any such commerce on the Sabbath, even if the peoples of the surrounding lands could not be effectively prohibited from engaging in such commerce. The refusal of any of the people to purchase anything on the Sabbath would be an effective discouragement. While Persian rulers such as Darius and Artaxerxes had provided for the building of the temple and for its sacrifices, giving in some cases longer-term provision, and in other cases large once-off gifts, the continued financial support for the service of the temple and its upkeep would have to be provided by the people themselves. This support for the temple would be achieved through the payment of a yearly tax of a third of a shekel.

In addition, they cast lots for the provision of wood for the offerings at appointed times of the year, and they also commit themselves to the consistent offering of the firstfruits of their produce. As Exodus chapter 23 verse 19 commands, The best of the firstfruits of your ground you shall bring into the house of the Lord your God.

The firstfruits were part of the means by which the Levites themselves were provided for.

Deuteronomy chapter 18 verses 1 to 4. The Levitical priests, all the tribe of Levi, shall have no portion or inheritance with Israel.

They shall eat the Lord's food offerings as their inheritance. They shall have no inheritance among their brothers. The Lord is their inheritance, as he promised them. And this shall be the priest's due from the people, from those offering a sacrifice, whether an ox or a sheep. They shall give to the priest the shoulder and the two cheeks and the stomach, the firstfruits of your grain, of your wine and of your oil, and the first fleece of your sheep you shall give him. Similar things are said about the tithes in Numbers chapter 18 verses 20 to 24.

[9 : 25] And the Lord said to Aaron, You shall have no inheritance in their land, neither shall you have any portion among them. I am your portion and your inheritance among the people of Israel. To the Levites I have given every tithe in Israel for an inheritance, in return for their service that they do, their service in the tent of meeting, so that the people of Israel do not come near the tent of meeting, lest they bear sin and die.

But the Levites shall do the service of the tent of meeting, and they shall bear their iniquity. It shall be a perpetual statute throughout your generations, and among the people of Israel they shall have no inheritance. For the tithe of the people of Israel, which they present as a contribution to the Lord, I have given to the Levites for an inheritance. Therefore I have said of them that they shall have no inheritance among the people of Israel. If the people were faithful, the Levites would be fairly well off. However, as the Levites depended upon the people's commitment to the law for their provision, their material conditions might have been a significant indicator of the spiritual state of the nation. A question to consider, of all of the commandments of the law of Moses, why do you think the stipulations mentioned in this covenant document are so foregrounded?