

Nehemiah 8: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Nehemiah chapter 8 And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the water gate, and they told Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses that the Lord had commanded Israel.

So Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly, both men and women, and all who could understand what they heard on the first day of the seventh month. And he read from it facing the square before the water gate, from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women, and those who could understand.

And the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law. And Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that they had made for the purpose, and beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Aniah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseah on his right hand, and Padaiah, Mishael, Malkijah, Hashem, Hashpadana, Zechariah, and Meshulam on his left hand.

And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people. And as he opened it, all the people stood. And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, Amen, Amen, lifting up their hands.

And they bowed their heads and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground. Also Jeshua, Benai, Sherebiah, Jamin, Aqab, Shabbathai, Hodiah, Maaseah, Kalita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Paliah, the Levites, helped the people to understand the law, while the people remained in their places.

[1 : 29] They read from the book, from the law of God clearly, and they gave the sense so that the people understood the reading. And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites, who taught the people, said to all the people, This day is holy to the Lord your God.

Do not mourn or weep. For all the people wept as they heard the words of the law. Then he said to them, Go your way, eat the fat, and drink sweet wine, and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready.

For this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength. So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, Be quiet, for this day is holy.

Do not be grieved. And all the people went their way to eat and drink, and to send portions, and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them. On the second day the heads of fathers' houses of all the people, with the priests and the Levites, came together to Ezra the scribe in order to study the words of the law.

And they found it written in the law that the Lord had commanded by Moses that the people of Israel should dwell in booths during the feast of the seventh month, and that they should proclaim it and publish it in all their towns and in Jerusalem.

[2 : 38] Go out to the hills and bring branches of olive, wild olive, myrtle, palm, and other leafy trees to make booths, as it is written. So the people went out and brought them, and made booths for themselves, each on his roof, and in their courts, and in the courts of the house of God, and in the square at the water gate, and in the square at the gate of Ephraim.

And all the assembly of those who had returned from the captivity made booths and lived in the booths. For from the days of Jeshua the son of Nun to that day the people of Israel had not done so, and there was very great rejoicing.

And day by day, from the first day to the last day, he read from the book of the law of God. They kept the feast seven days, and on the eighth day there was a solemn assembly, according to the rule.

Many commentators see a jarring disjunction between the section beginning in the last couple of verses of Nehemiah chapter 7 and concluding at the end of chapter 10, with the surrounding context.

Mark Thrantvide, for instance, argues that, in terms of narrative continuity, it would seem to make most sense to move directly from chapter 7 to chapter 11. Besides this, the narrative switches from the first-person narrative of the material of the Nehemiah memoirs to a third-person narrative.

[3 : 52] The most prominent character in this chapter is Ezra the scribe and priest, leading several scholars to believe that this material originally belonged to the book of Ezra, before being moved to this point by an editor.

Nehemiah's role in chapters 8 to 10 is a minor one. Further questions are raised when we consider that, although Ezra had returned 13 years previously to establish the teaching and enforcing of the law, this is the first evidence that we have of him giving the sort of teaching that he was supposed to give.

Andrew Steinman pushes back against such arguments, maintaining that the current sequence of the book makes sense when we consider that these events intervened between the completion and the dedication of the wall because Jerusalem needed to be repopulated and there was little purpose in dedicating the wall if there were not enough people in Jerusalem to sustain it as a city.

First the temple must be restored, then the walls rebuilt, and then the city must truly be repopulated. And this repopulation of the city requires a dedication of the people and their formation as a faithful company through the instruction of the law.

Only after that occurred would the time be ready for the dedication of the wall. Thrompheid argues that in chapter 7 verse 73 to chapter 8 verse 12, in chapter 8 verses 13 to 18, in chapter 9 verse 1 to 10 verse 39, we have three successive scenes with an identical sequence.

[5 : 14] They include a time reference, an assembly, an encounter with the law, application, and then response. There are further repetitions to be observed that strengthen these connections. The gathering occurs on the first day of the seventh month.

In Leviticus chapter 23 verses 23 to 25, we read of this day, which is the feast of trumpets. And the Lord spoke to Moses saying, speak to the people of Israel saying, in the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall observe a day of solemn rest, a memorial proclaimed with blast of trumpets, a holy convocation.

You shall not do any ordinary work and you shall present a food offering to the Lord. The seventh month, unsurprisingly, was the principal month of the Jewish calendar, the Sabbath month, as it were.

It contained the feast of trumpets on the first day, the day of atonement on the 10th, the feast of tabernacles on the 15th to the 21st, and a final sacred assembly on the 22nd.

Ten days of the month then were feast or fast days. The first day of the seventh month was also a New Year's festival. Interestingly, there is no reference to the day of atonement in this chapter.

[6 : 22] This is the month after the wall was completed, six days after the wall's completion, and 58 days after work on it first began. The people assemble in the square facing the water gate, which was on the east wall, although it wasn't one of the gates that we read of in chapter 3.

Presumably, it wasn't part of the restored wall. The people themselves seem to be the ones who want the law to be read to them, and they summon Ezra to do so, seemingly as a scholar of the text, as he's referred to as the scribe.

Such a public reading of the law is similar to that which is prescribed in Deuteronomy chapter 31, verses 10 to 13, although this reading is a couple of weeks prior to the time of the Feast of Tabernacles, the time when such a reading would typically occur, and does within this chapter too.

And Moses commanded them, at the end of every seven years, at the set time in the year of release, at the Feast of Booths, when all Israel comes to appear before the Lord your God at the place that he will choose, you shall read this law before all Israel in their hearing.

Assemble the people, men, women, and little ones, and the sojourner within your towns, that they may hear and learn to fear the Lord your God, and be careful to do all the words of this law, and that their children, who have not known it, may hear and learn to fear the Lord your God, as long as you live in the land that you are going over the Jordan to possess.

[7 : 43] The similarities include the general assembly of the people, including women and children. Ezra reads from early in the morning until noon, around six hours. As Andrew Steinman notes, this would not have been long enough to read the entirety of the Pentateuch.

Presumably Ezra was reading a substantial body of prominent passages in it, maybe even up to half its contents, or perhaps he was particularly focusing upon the book of Deuteronomy. He stood upon a wooden platform so that he could be seen by all, was flanked by prominent leaders of the people.

The assembly was not merely a long scriptural teaching session, but was also a corporate act of worship. Ezra led them in praising the Lord, with the people answering Amen and bowing before the Lord.

Thirteen named Levites assisted Ezra in his reading and instruction of the people. There are different ways to understand what they were doing. They could have been giving the people a text in Aramaic, while Ezra read the text in the original Hebrew.

Or each one of them might be teaching some part of the assembly, ensuring that everyone grasped what they needed to. Charles Fensham notes the similarity between this and the behaviour of the Levites during the reign of Jehoshaphat, described in 2 Chronicles 17, verse 9.

[8 : 55] And they taught in Judah, having the book of the law of the Lord with them. They went about through all the cities of Judah and taught among the people. From verse 8, it seems more likely that the Levites were translating and also giving the sense of what they were translating.

At this point, we finally see Ezra and Nehemiah together, engaged in a single act. Perhaps surprisingly, considering their stature among the people and the fact that they were contemporaries working in Jerusalem, we don't read much about them acting together.

However, when we consider the short span of time that Nehemiah's account covers to this point, the events of this chapter are less than a year from his first hearing of the report from Jerusalem, a little more than a couple of months or so since he arrived in Jerusalem and started rebuilding the walls.

It probably isn't all that strange. One of the concerns of the leaders was to ensure that the people recognised recognised and observed the character of the day as a feast day. Although they were appropriately convicted by the words of the law, the Lord desired that his people would have joy on that day and their mourning was out of keeping with the day's character.

Ezra instructed them to honour the day as one of feasting, encouraging them to enjoy God's good gifts and to show charity. Such feelings and expressions of joy were not merely to be instinctive responses, but were to be things that the people practised at appropriate times so that they would be formed rightly.

[10 : 16] Joy was supposed to be at the heart of Israel's life and the festal days were important for this reason. The people were to rejoice in the Lord, expressing their confidence in his power and support, their delight in his gifts and their love for each other.

They were also to be assured of the Lord's delight and joy in them, that they were his people and that he intended their good. Developing such a joy would be a source of great strength for the people, so although mourning on account of their sins was important, the priority of cultivating joy eclipsed that at this time.

The main company of the people dispersed after the celebration of the Feast of Trumpets. However, on the following day, the heads of the fathers' houses, the priests and the Levites, continued their study of the law.

As they read the law, they were reminded of the instructions for the Feast of Booths, tabernacles or in gathering, which they had almost forgotten. In Exodus, all that is instructed concerning the Feast of Ingathering is the time, and that it is a pilgrimage festival, in chapter 23, verse 16, and chapter 34, verse 22.

Numbers chapter 29 gives an extensive list of sacrifices for each day of the feast. Deuteronomy chapter 16, verses 13 to 15, focuses on the rejoicing and feasting.

[11 : 30] You shall keep the Feast of Booths seven days, when you have gathered in the produce from your threshing floor and your winepress. You shall rejoice in your feast, you and your son and your daughter, your male servant and your female servant, the Levite, the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow who are within your towns.

For seven days you shall keep the feast to the Lord your God at the place that the Lord will choose, because the Lord your God will bless you in all your produce and in all the work of your hands, so that you will be altogether joyful.

Leviticus chapter 23, verses 33 to 43, provides the fullest instructions for the celebration, however. And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Speak to the people of Israel, saying, On the fifteenth day of this seventh month and for seven days is the Feast of Booths to the Lord.

On the first day shall be a holy convocation. You shall not do any ordinary work. For seven days you shall present food offerings to the Lord. On the eighth day you shall hold a holy convocation and present a food offering to the Lord.

It is a solemn assembly. You shall not do any ordinary work. These are the appointed feasts of the Lord, which you shall proclaim as times of holy convocation, for presenting to the Lord food offerings, burnt offerings, and grain offerings, sacrifices, and drink offerings, each on its proper day, besides the Lord's Sabbaths and besides your gifts and besides all your vow offerings and besides all your freewill offerings, which you give to the Lord.

[12 : 58] On the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when you have gathered in the produce of the land, you shall celebrate the Feast of the Lord seven days. On the first day shall be a solemn rest, and on the eighth day shall be a solemn rest.

And you shall take on the first day the fruit of splendid trees, branches of palm trees, and boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook, and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God seven days.

You shall celebrate it as a feast to the Lord for seven days in the year. It is a statute forever throughout your generations. You shall celebrate it in the seventh month. You shall dwell in booths for seven days.

All native Israelites shall dwell in booths, that your generations may know that I made the people of Israel dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt. I am the Lord your God.

Leviticus gives an explanation for the festival, that it commemorates the deliverance from Egypt, and it also includes another element unique to its instructions, the practice of living in booths.

[13 : 57] While we have references to the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles earlier in the pre-exilic period in the land, and also in Ezra chapter 3 verse 4, verse 17 might suggest that the practice of living in booths had been neglected since the time of Joshua, perhaps because it was more complicated when there was a central sanctuary, and the feast was observed as a pilgrimage feast.

Leviticus doesn't seem to stipulate that it needed to be celebrated at a central location, as the other laws of the Feast of Tabernacles did in the other books of the Pentateuch. Alternatively, the point might be that this Feast of Booths exceeded all previous celebrations of the feast since the people first entered the promised land.

In celebrating the Feast of Booths, commemorating the Exodus, and recalling Joshua the son of Nun, there is another association drawn between the Exodus generation and the returnees as a new Exodus generation, patterning themselves after those who went before.

Ezra reads from the book of the law every single day of the feast. This was usually the practice on sabbatical years. Steinman argues that we should relate this to the events of chapter 5, earlier in that year, when Nehemiah was calling the rich Jews to forgive the debts of their poorer brethren, which would have been done in the Sabbath year.

As a festival, the Feast of Booths recalled the very first day of the Exodus, when Israel left their settled habitations in Egypt, and stepped out following the Lord and his servant Moses, staying in a place called Succoth.

[15 : 24] This festival was to be one in which Israel joyfully revisited the very dawn of its history as a nation. It was to relive its calling forth from Egypt in its youth.

The joy and the commemoration of its earlier days serves as a sort of national reviving, a return to a sort of childhood once more. A question to consider, what are some of the ways in which Christians are trained in the cultivation of joy?