

Nehemiah 8-11

Lesson 7 Fall 2013 Series 5

In chapter 8, for the first time in the Book of Nehemiah we will have Ezra introduced. He will play a leading role in the reading of the law and the making of a new covenant with God. It should be noted that in this section the memoirs of Nehemiah give way to records in the third person and then at 12:27 the story will once again return to the memoirs and the first person narrative.¹ This section probably should have been divided in the middle of 7:73, but at any rate we are introduced here to a rare moment of deep responsiveness on the part of the people as they “gathered together” and they initiate what occurs next: they “told” Ezra to bring the “writing” (סֵפֶר) of Torah (“instruction” תּוֹרָה) of Moses. It is important to note that this is a writing that is described as one

¹ Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, in the Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries series (Downers Grove IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 2009), p. 113.

which “Yahweh had commanded (צִוָּה) for Israel.”

They clearly see the writings of Moses to have originated with God and not simply to be of human origin.

It should be noted that if you pick up a commentary on Nehemiah you will likely notice a great deal of controversy regarding this chapter and the ministry of Ezra in particular. According to some of these commentators Ezra and Nehemiah had no personal interaction. Commentators make the claim that the mention of Ezra in 8:9 is a later gloss to the text. It should be noted that Ezra is also mentioned at 12:26 and 12:36. He even leads one of the processions along the wall. One of the significant issues with those commentators that want to excise Ezra from the Book of Nehemiah is that they do not understand the importance of the sequence of events in Nehemiah, especially those from 7:1 to 12:26. They think Ezra and Nehemiah were not contemporary to one another. There is a significant reason for these

events in the context of Nehemiah: Jerusalem had to be repopulated.²

The motivation for the project to build the wall of Jerusalem was about far more than national pride. The faith and hope in God's promise of the Messiah that would come to a rebuilt Jerusalem are central to their motivation since they saw this rebuilding as a necessary precursor to the coming of the savior (Jeremiah 31:27-40; Daniel 9:25-27). The rebuilding of the wall was only one part of the prophets' message about the blessings on Jerusalem that would come before the arrival of the Messiah. Zechariah prophesied that God would once again populate Jerusalem (Zechariah 2:4; 8:1-23, especially 8:5, 7-8). Zechariah 12:10 specifically mentions the inhabitants of Jerusalem when it prophesies that they would mourn for the Messiah.³

The place of the narratives regarding Ezra are essential to the people in moving toward the time of

² Andrew E. Steinmann, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, in the Concordia Commentary series (Saint Louis MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2010), pp. 506-507.

³ Andrew E. Steinmann, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, pp. 506-507.

the Messiah. They do not appear to be something that is just an insertion into the text. Davies considers chapters 8-10 to be the pinnacle of the combined work of Ezra-Nehemiah coming with the proclamation of the Law. What has gone on before has prepared the people to be receptive to the Law at this moment and in this place. The Law is now heard by those for whom Ezra prayed in Ezra 9: his prayers are now answered. His appearance here now draws together, what have appeared to be separate paths in the restoration of God's people as recounted in these two works.⁴ This is the point toward that which has gone before has pointed, when the people of God turn their faces toward him and seek his will for their lives.

8:2-8 - Ezra does as the people asked and he brought the law before the "assembly" (עֲקֵלֶשֶׁתָּהּ ἐκκλησία - church). Notice the power of this righteous assembly of the people of God who are seeking the face of God. They even give orders to Ezra, the priest

⁴ Gordon F. Davies, *Ezra & Nehemiah*, in the Berit Olam Studies in Hebrew Narrative & Poetry series (Collegeville MN: The Liturgical Press, 1999), p. 111.

and he listens to them. It is highly likely that Ezra recognized that this was the answer to his prayers regarding the people and he is prepared.

The seventh month was Tishri, which followed the month Elul, the month in which the repairs to the wall had been completed. This convocation of the assembly took place just six days after the completion of the wall. The wall was completed on 25 Elul (Nehemiah 6:15), which is October 2, 445 BC. The date of the assembly is October 8, 445 BC. This was an especially important month in the Jewish calendar as four festivals took place during this month. The reading of Law takes place on the Festival of Trumpets (Leviticus 23:23-25; Numbers 29:1-6), which is the modern festival of Rosh Hashanah (New Year's Day). This was a day that was specified as an assembly day in the Law of Moses, but the impetus for the reading of the Law appears to come from the people. In this section (verse 1) Ezra is referred to as "the scribe" but in the next verse he is referred to as

“the priest Ezra”. The audience included women and children old enough to receive the instruction and the reading of the Law of Moses lasted for 6 hours. Even this would not have been long enough to read the entire Torah aloud. An oral reading of the entire Torah may take twelve to fifteen hours.⁵

Ezra reads some portion of the Torah, for these six hours. No more complaints when we go over time on Sunday morning. The reading here could not continue into the afternoon and into the evening because the priests were needed during the afternoon to offer the required sacrifices for the Festival of Trumpets (Leviticus 23:25; Numbers 29:2-6). Ezra stands on a great wooden platform built for this purpose flanked by six priests on each side.⁶



⁵ Andrew E. Steinmann, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, p. 509.

⁶ Andrew E. Steinmann, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, p. 510.

Notice how Ezra opens the writing (probably a scroll) in their sight. It is important to understand that they recognize the authority of the words from God that were recorded by Moses. They demonstrate their great reverence for the word of God by standing up when Ezra opens it. The words read here would have been in Hebrew. It should be noted that with the deportation of Palestinian Jews to Babylonia in the early sixth century BC there began a gradual and yet distinctive shift in language habits for the people of Palestine. What we today would call Classical Hebrew (“the language of Judah” 2 Kings 18:26; Isaiah 36:11-13) of the pre-exilic period gave way at first to a more Aramaicized form of the language. Over time Aramaic became more and more dominant.⁷ This would add to the need for experts to assist in the interpretation of scripture over time. Much in the way that English has changed for us today, so that there is a real need to interpret language from older

⁷ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, “The Languages of Palestine in the First Century A.D.*”, *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 32:4 (1970), pp. 501-531.

documents such as the King James Version of the Bible from 1611. If this is not done there will be misunderstanding and misinterpretation.

One thing that should be noted here is the powerful message sent by Ezra regarding the democratization of scripture. Scripture is not just for the elite, the expert, the Priest, or the Levite only. This is a lesson forgotten by many in the church for more than a thousand years. William Tyndale would pay with his life to translate scripture into English, John Wycliffe was disinterred and his remains desecrated because of his work bringing the scripture back to the masses in a manner reminiscent of what is happening in Nehemiah with Ezra reading. We must be great students of all of scripture in order to hear the legacy that God has left for us in his dealings with people. This section of Scripture (Ezra-Nehemiah), has been neglected by so many and yet it has powerful and important lessons to teach us about the

nature of God and how his people should relate to him.

Another tremendously powerful lesson from this section of Scripture comes in the response of the people. They not only change their posture, they worshipped God. **Reading Scripture is worship.** I have heard people ask the question before about how can modern Jews follow God when their Temple is gone and they cannot be obedient to him in offering sacrifices and the other things required to be done at the temple. At least part of the answer to that question, for them at least, lies in their study of Torah. In the period after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, Talmud/Torah (along with liturgical prayer), replaced sacrifices as the primary means of worship. The rabbis even declared Talmud/Torah study to be greater than the daily sacrificial offering and greater even than building the Temple. Rather than a less desirable replacement for a lost system,

Talmud/Torah becomes a preferred means of divine worship.⁸

We, today, have lost the deep awe and reverence for Scripture that was a part of people's worship and reverence of God in the past. We must once again come to understand the mysterious power of this word from God and how it is an integral component in our transformative process to become more and more like our Lord Jesus Christ.

8:9-12 - At verse 9 we are once again brought back to our man character, Nehemiah, who appears to stand alongside Ezra and the Levites as the Scriptures are taught, "made to understand" the words. As we have seen earlier, a part of this may be the result of language drift over the centuries, but whatever the reason these people take it as their task to help the people not just to hear the words, but to understand the words. This "giving of sense" (verse 8) will likely also have included a part of the great oral tradition of

⁸ (Babylonian Talmud, *Eruvin* 63b). Said R. Samuel bar Inayya in the name of Rab, "Greater is study of Torah than offering the daily whole-offering, for he said to him, 'Now I have come' (Josh 5:14)."

the Jews. The tradition is that at Mount Sinai Moses was not only given the written word but also the Mishnah, which was the oral explanation of how the written laws should be executed and followed. This was not written down, but passed from generation to generation. The idea was that it was to remain fluid. The principles were to remain the same century after century, but the application of those principles was meant to be adapted to all types of new circumstances. There is difficulty dating this tradition, as one might imagine, and so any reference to it is highly speculative.

As the people of Jerusalem heard the word of the Torah read the people wept. The response of weeping here was likely due to the fact that this reading of the Law touched their hearts with how much they had not kept the Law of God. In some sense such a response seems wholly appropriate and proper, but Ezra wants their focus elsewhere. He wants them to focus not upon their failings and

shortcomings but upon the compassionate grace of their beneficent God. In light of this he tells them to “Go your way, and eat the fat and drink sweet wine,” and to share with those who had nothing prepared.⁹ In verse 11 we are told that the Levites, “calmed” or “silenced” (הַשְׁקֵט - κατασιωπάω) the people, because this was a day that was “holy.” We are then told that the people did as they were directed.

8:13-18 - The thirst for the study of the Law continues and on the second day the people come forward to study the Law with Ezra and they found that they were supposed to live in booths during the festival of the seventh month. There is no debate, there is just obedience and a proclamation goes out and the people begin to make booths, in order to observe the Law of Moses. They relished in observing this festival in the manner that it had been done since the days of Joshua (verse 17). They relished the continuity with their past and they kept the festival

⁹ H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, in *The Word Biblical Commentary series*, Vol. 16 (Nashville TN: Thomas Nelson, 1985), pp. 291-292.

according to the ordinance with a solemn assembly on the eighth day. For seven days there was great rejoicing, but on the last day there was solemnity just as directed by the Law. They took great delight in being obedient.

9:1-5 - Two days after the assembly that followed the Festival of Booths (8:18) the Israelites gathered in an assembly of repentance (9:1). The date was October 31, 445 BC. Fasting, the wearing of sackcloth, and the putting of dirt on themselves were all common signs of mourning and repentance. This picked up the unfinished business of 8:9 and addresses the desire of the people to mourn for their disobedience. The festival was not the proper time or venue, they must observe the festival first. What happens in association with this time of mourning will link tightly with the events of Nehemiah 13. In verse 2 we are told that the Israelites separated themselves from foreigners.¹⁰ For some at least this has been

¹⁰ Andrew E. Steinmann, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, p. 531.

seen as evidence that the view of Israel as the people of God was exclusively based upon race. However, this is not the case if the context is carefully considered here. Would it be proper for people that have become converts to Judaism to have confessed the sins of their ancestors, which in this context would have been Israelite ancestors? They were not in reality their ancestors. The passage in Ezra 6:21 would seem to indicate that this is indeed why there is the separation here and not some form of racial prejudice.¹¹

They stood up and read from the Law for three hours and then followed this with three hours of confession and worship. This then is followed by a great cry of praise from the Levites who glorify God in praise and adoration.

9:6-15 - This section begins an extended historical review of God's dealings with Israel. This

¹¹ H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, p. 311.

recitation of the nature of God will be set against the nature of the people starting in verse sixteen.

9:16-25 - In this section the rebellious and unfaithful nature of Israel stands in sharp contrast to the nature and faithfulness of God just recited in the previous verses.

9:26-37 - The sinful nature of Israel continues to be starkly contrasted in this section resulting in Israel being given into the hands of their enemies (verse 27). Suffering then causes them to “cry out” to God and God sends “saviors” (יִשְׁעַ, the root word of Joshua or the name of Jesus in Hebrew) to them because of his “compassion” (רַחֲמִים). Ezra continues to recite the unfaithfulness of the people in the face of the continuing compassion and faithfulness of God. The result was their captivity and slavery, where they remain as slaves to this very day (verse 36). They acknowledge the great richness of the land promised

to them by God, which due to their sin now goes to foreign kings.

9:38-10:1-27 - The result of the reading of the Law, the acknowledgement of the nature and faithfulness of God, and their confession of sins, is to make a “binding agreement” that was official. Upon it were the names of Nehemiah and the other leader of Israel as witness to the official nature of this covenant. It is binding for the people.

10:28-39 - In this section the rest of the people enter into this agreement and it is of interest that at verse 29 there is talk of entering into a “curse” or an “oath” to observe and do all the commandments of Yahweh. They particularly cite that they will not give their daughters to the people of the land or take foreign daughters for their sons. The making of such alliances was extremely tempting. They also make an agreement that would provide regular support for the temple and would not rely up on foreign help from the king of Persia (verse 32). They recite obligations

for the tithe offerings that will play a crucial part in supporting those with ministry (Λειτουργός) responsibilities in Israel from the priests, to the Levites to the Gatekeepers. They make a pledge not to neglect the “house of God.” They clearly see this as crucial, as being a part of their faithfulness to God.

11:1-2 - These verses are a narrative that unites the solemn agreement of the previous chapter to the new residents of Jerusalem that will be listed in the verses that follow. These representatives provide leadership and they minister before God and provide both an example and an inspiration to the people. They cast lots to decide who would live in Jerusalem, one out of ten, a tithe of the people in a sense. There is also very much a sense here that the people who are willing to live in Jerusalem are serving God and hence the “blessing” for those who do this “willingly.” This is holy service to God and it is supported by those who do not serve in this fashion but

nevertheless have a heart for the kingdom of God and seek its continuation, expansion, and glory.

11:3-24 - We are then given a detailed list of those who are to serve in Jerusalem. This list stands as a monument to their faith in God and holds these people up for the people of Israel as examples of heroic faith to be aspired to, emulated by later generations, while at the same time supported by those of that current generation. This list includes the leaders of the province, The Judahites, Benjaminites, Priests, Levites, the gatekeepers and the overseer of the Levites, all who lived in Jerusalem as part of the plan to be faithful to the promise of God to restore the people to the land. They lived in trust in this ancient promise that has now been acknowledged in this new covenant made by this generation with God. Notice too, the corporate nature of the covenant. So often we have seen everything through the individualized eyes of modern Americans. Identity here is corporate identity with corporate responsibility before God.

11:25-36 - A city such as Jerusalem needed food and supplies. These would be supplied largely by the people who worked the land to grow crops and tend livestock outside the wall. These people lived in the villages that surrounded the city and served an integral role in allowing the city to both survive and to prosper. They too are listed here by Nehemiah.

This section of the book of Nehemiah stands as a monument to a people who were diligently trying to be faithful to God and who had hearts that were attentive to his words in directing their lives. Truly there is much here to challenge us to be ever more diligent in our walk of faith before God today. We today continue the story of the people sought by God. God seeks relationship with his people, and covenant is part of that seeking after relationship.

Synopsis

In chapter 8 we reach the nexus of the works we call Ezra and Nehemiah. The prayers of Ezra the Priest are answered here with the gathering of the people and them calling out for the word of God to be brought forward to them. They hunger and thirst for understanding of who God is and what he calls upon them to do and be. This thirst is tremendous, and the respect that is demonstrated for the Torah is immense. They stand and listen for six hours to the reading and interpretation of Scripture and it says their ears were attentive. The impact of the reading and explanation of Scripture is to bring them to worship God with heads bowed. This is extraordinary as the normal posture would have been with hands raised and eyes looking toward heaven. They are deeply affected by the reading and want to weep and mourn; presumably because they are convicted by their sin before God.

The current festival was not deemed to be the time for this so they were told not to mourn, but to be joyful in the knowledge that God is their strength.

They continue to read from Scripture and they try to follow the instructions they find there such as living in booths and rejoicing for seven days and then having a solemn day as prescribed in the ordinance.

When all of this has passed they do assemble to confess their sins. Not that their sin is corporate not what we today often think of when we think of confession. They recognized that the sins of the individual affected the group as God dealt with them corporately. As part of this confession they also recite the powerful and faithful works of God in creation, with Abraham and bringing Israel out of slavery in Egypt, caring for them in the wilderness and giving them the land of the promise. They then recite their sins almost as a response to all of this. Their response to this faithful and gracious God is seen as a response

of unfaithfulness and treachery against the backdrop of God's graciousness and faithfulness.

As a result of their sins God remained faithful and as the covenant specified he brought to them the curses, which were as much a part of the covenant as the blessings (Deuteronomy 27-28). God is faithful and keeps his word. As a result of the reading of the word of God and the confession of the people they made (cut) a firm agreement with God. It was signed by the chief officials of the people. A summary of this covenant is given. It will insure the support of the cult of the temple and provide order for the community.

Next we are told of the procedure that was followed to repopulate the City of Jerusalem. We are given a detailed list of names for those who would dwell in Jerusalem. This is couched in terms of service and sacrifice to God.

Main Points

1. The Word of God is meant for all people.
2. Reading Scripture is worship.
3. Scripture convicts us of our shortcomings and challenges us to recognize the faithfulness of God.
4. The covenant calls us to corporate responsibility and not just individual responsibility.

Questions

1. Why do you think the people call for the Scriptures to be read?
2. Why do you think people today do not have respect for the Scriptures?
3. What role do you think rejoicing plays in our relationship to God?
4. What is the role of confession in our relationship to God and to each other?
5. Why do you think it is so hard for us to sometimes understand Scripture?
6. Is there value in studying Scripture? If so what is the value? If there is not any value, why not?
7. Why do you think we tire so easily today when Scripture is read?
8. How do we bring about the type of revival that we see in Nehemiah 8 today? Where does it begin?
9. Do you think the words of Ezra-Nehemiah

have any place in our society today? If so
what place? If not why not?

10. What do you think this section of Scripture
teaches us about the nature of God?

11. What can we expect from God if we are
unfaithful? Why?

12. What does it mean for God to be faithful?