

Nehemiah 8-10

In the final stages the previous outline dealt with the repopulation of the city of Jerusalem. We will read more about this in chapter 11. First we will learn about a revival, a reformation, in which Ezra played a prominent role. This section has, of course, not been taken from Nehemiah's memoirs.

1. The book of the Law and the Feast of Tabernacles – Nehemiah 8

In the verses 1-13 of chapter 8 we find the reading from the book of the Law of Moses by Ezra and others; in the verses 14-19 about the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles.

- 1.1 “The children of Israel were in their towns”, the given date refers back to the days before arrangements had been made to repopulate Jerusalem.
- 1.2 Verse 2 informs us of a public meeting, which was most probably convened by the leaders of the people at Ezra's insistence. He, the scribe, knew what Leviticus 23 says about the seventh month of the Israelite year: the first day was to be a day of rest, a Sabbath, on which “a holy convocation” should be convened (23:24); this used to be the Israelite New Year's Day. In this context the people's request to Ezra to read from the book of the Law may be understandable.
- 1.3 “The book of the Law of Moses which the LORD had given to Israel” is the book mentioned in Deuteronomy 31:9, and most likely included also other parts from what are now called ‘the Five Books of Moses’.

According to the stipulations of the covenant of Sinai it was to be publicly read every seventh year, the book itself having been entrusted to the care of the priests. Well, Ezra was indeed a priest (8:3)!

- 1.4 This was done for “both men and women and all who could hear with understanding”. By the latter are meant children of the age of twelve years and over (Deuteronomy 31:13).
- 1.5 Ezra and his assistants read it very clearly to the people. Every one could hear it and was thus put under the authority of God’s Word. Not the whole book was read, however. It says: Ezra read “from it”, although this reading took several hours. The periodic reading of the Law had been stipulated by the LORD, and here we find the beginning of a return to the obedience of that stipulation (Deuteronomy 31:10f).
- 1.6 The people immediately acknowledged the book of the Law as God’s Word. It says: they stood, and to the doxology which preceded the reading they responded with a double “Amen”. Then, as a token of deep respect they bowed their heads (see Genesis 48:12; II Samuel 14:33; 24:20).
- 1.7 Further explanation was given by temple officials, who had, of course, themselves been instructed first (by Ezra?).
- 1.8 The reaction was: weeping (9), which was most likely caused by hearing the threats belonging to the sanctions of the covenant (e.g. those from Deuteronomy 28). This may have been because the people recognised the possibility of another exile.
- 1.9 Ezra and the levites – but in particular Nehemiah, the governor, who is especially mentioned here – made it clear to the people: This is not a day of mourning, but of joy, a holy day, the LORD Himself rejoices over what has been achieved (10). The future would be determined by this New Year’s Day.
- 1.10 The seventh year, in which the periodic reading of the Law was to take place, is called a year of “release”, so of relief for the poor (Deuteronomy 15:1). This release had already been accomplished (Nehemiah 5). Therefore a festive meal was to be held, in which the poor were to participate (11:13).
- 1.11 On the second day the heads of family with other (religious) leaders came to Ezra for further study of the words of the Law. They wanted to serve the LORD according to His Word. This was reformation indeed!

- 1.12 They read in the Law about the Feast of Tabernacles to be celebrated for seven days, from the fifteenth of the month (Leviticus 23). They did celebrate it. A note is added reading: “from the days of Jeshua the son of Nun to that day the people of Israel had not done so” – with this enthusiasm (17). It had been celebrated at an earlier stage (Ezra 3:4), but not “so”!
- 1.13 The Feast of Tabernacles was the time of the annual renewal of one’s faithfulness to the covenant. That is why on that particular occasion the periodic reading of the complete Law of God took place, every seventh year. So here is a covenant renewal from the side of the people (19). A festive meeting concluded the feast, the “holy convocation” of Leviticus 23:36.

2. Day of humiliation and prayer – 9:1-37

Chapter 9 reports on a day of humiliation and prayer which was held on the twenty-fourth day of the seventh month, so shortly after the Feast of Tabernacles was celebrated.

- 2.1 The feelings of guilt, awakened by the instruction of the people in the Law (8:10), and pushed back by the leaders in view of the celebration of the New Year’s Feast and the Feast of Tabernacles, found their expression after the celebrations. It invoked a spontaneous gathering of the people as we can see from their fasting and mourning (9:1).
- 2.2 Here we see reformation continued: all foreign women and children were sent away (Ezra 10). The people were again aware of their special position and task – though at the same time they were convinced that the nation had frequently failed during the course of history -; they knew that their identity did not allow room for mixing with other people.
- 2.3 This meeting lasted half a day. The first three hours were spent by reading the Law, then confession of sin was made during the following period of three hours.
- 2.4 Indeed, here was on-going reformation. The people as it were took over Ezra’s confession of guilt (Ezra 9). Several elements from that prayer return here: the feelings of shame (Ezra 9:5,6;

Nehemiah 9:1,3); the references to history (right throughout both chapters); the mentioning of the fathers (Ezra 9:9; Nehemiah 9:9,16,23,32,34); the work of the prophets (Ezra 9:11; Nehemiah 9:26,30,32); God's commandments or His Law (Ezra 9:10,14; Nehemiah 9:13,14,16,29,34); the people's disobedience – formulated in various terms – (Ezra 9:7; Nehemiah 9:16,26,28,29,31); their surrender into the hands of the enemy (Ezra 9:7; Nehemiah 9:27,28,30); God's mercy, time and again bestowed on them during the course of history (Ezra 9:8; Nehemiah 9:17,19,27); the situation in which they lived: they called themselves slaves (Ezra 9:9; Nehemiah 9:36); the critical conditions in material respect (verse 15 in both chapters); and God's justice in His doings (Ezra 9:15; Nehemiah 9:33).

- 2.5 In Nehemiah 9 it is all much more detailed. Even though this chapter may only be a summary of it, the guilt confession lasted no less than three hours. This chapter goes through the entire Old Testament history, starting at the creation (6), then onto Abraham's election (7), the covenant made with him also (8), the exodus from Egypt (9-11), the journey through the desert (12,19), the proclamation of God's Law from Mount Sinai (13,14), Israel receiving manna from heaven (15,20), the gift of their own land (15,22-25), their repeated stiffneckedness (16-18,26,28,29), but also God's longsuffering and His mercy (17,19,27,28,30,31).

Question: Whereof are we reminded in the last part of verse 17?

- 2.6 The main point in their confession was the breaking of the covenant, typified by Ezra as "faithlessness" (Ezra 9:4); over against which stands God's faithfulness (Nehemiah 9:32,33), and His justice in all that came upon them in accordance with the covenant (33).
- 2.7 This covenant included: a land (8,15,22), the gift of kings and priests (Ezra 9:7; Nehemiah 9:32,34,35), right ordinances and true laws, good statutes and commandments (14). In 9:29

these are called “ordinances, by the observance of which a man shall live”. Here is real life, restored and governed by God. Therewith Israel’s position and mandate is again typified: here was a Theocracy; they had to show in their life how it shall be when God’s grace, by way of atonement, redeems life from the sin of transgressing His will and doing one’s own will; a shadow and rich foretaste of life in the completion of Christ’s Kingdom. The statements about “all the hardship that has come upon us, upon our kings, our princes, our priests, our prophets, our fathers, and all Thy people” (32) show the great misery of those days. They had been given a “kingdom” (35), a Theocracy, but through their common sin it no longer existed.

Question: Does “live” in 9:29 refer to eternal life only?

- 2.8 From all this it may be clear that in particular among the levites Ezra’s reformative work found acceptance. Their prayer was a grand elaboration on his own prayer in Ezra chapter 9. They had learned to understand the meaning of Israel’s history, of Abraham’s election, and of the covenant. It meant that the Kingdom of God could only exist by His grace!

3. ‘A firm covenant’ – 9:38-10:39

- 3.1 The last verse of chapter 9 may, though not according to our feelings based on our own prayer practice, have belonged to the prayer in the previous verses. It is, however, also quite possible that it informs us of a decision taken after the prayer had been concluded.
- 3.2 The leaders, civil as well as religious ones, set their seal (our: signature) to it, for they had sworn a solemn oath from now on to keep the Law of God, which had been read to them on several occasions.
- 3.3 In 10:1-27 follows the list of those who set their seal: Nehemiah’s name as governor being the first one.

Then follow the names of the priests, levites, and chiefs of the people, joined by all the others – among whom more priests and levites, and also women and older children (28-29a).

- 3.4 They did so according to covenant style, under oath and self cursing. By means of the oath they confirmed their promise to live in obedience to God's Law as given by the hand of Moses. It was indeed a great moment in Israel's history. This moment of covenant renewal now that, by their return from exile and the completed reconstruction of Jerusalem's temple and walls, they had been given back their specific position in the history of the nations, through the mercy of God, He, Who remained faithful to the covenant made with Abraham, and with king David.
- 3.5 The obligations they took upon themselves set out to correct the nation's past weaknesses. These were the following: They would keep themselves from intermarriage (30); they would keep the sabbath and other sacred days (31); make voluntary contributions of the first-fruits and first-born (32-34); and they would offer tithes, to be collected by levites (37b-39). Thus strong emphasis was put on maintaining the temple worship. This is why we read in the final verses and most likely also in the final sentence of the document to which we were referred in 9:38 : "We will not neglect the house of our God" (39b).