

## Covenant & Kingdom

Nehemiah 7:73b – 10:39

### Who are we?

Now that the wall is complete and people have moved back to Jerusalem from exile, attention turns to the question of identity. In many ways, the people have lost their identity as much as they've lost their homeland. They lost their identity by becoming a people far from God and far from acting as the people of God.

The corrective that we see in these few chapters is a three-part process: Reading of the Law, Confession and a Firm Commitment.

Ezra and his companions read from the book of the law for about six hours (from early morning until midday), and despite this length of time men, women, and children gave their rapt attention. Even during this long meeting only a portion of the Pentateuch could have been read.

When Ezra unrolled the scroll—codexes or “books” were not used in pre-Christian times—all the people stood in reverence (cf. Job 29:8). Ezra offered a blessing to the Lord (cf. 1 Chr 16:36; 2 Chr 6:4; perhaps, “Blessed are you, O Lord, our God . . .”), who is here given the title of “the great God” (cf. 1:5; Deut 10:17; Jer 32:18). The twofold “Amen” of the people in v. 6 expresses agreement with the blessing of the Lord and acceptance of the law (a double “Amen” is frequent as an introduction to speeches by Jesus in the NT); the people's raised hands connote expectation and dependency (cf. Ezra 9:5; Ps 28:2; 134:2).

A holy object is one that has been separated from its usual setting to be dedicated to the Lord.

Ezra urged the people not to mourn or cry, although that had indeed been their reaction to hearing the law, probably reflecting their guilt for failing to observe the law perfectly (cf. Josiah's reaction when the law was read to him in 2 Kgs 22:11; 2 Chr 34:19). Instead, Ezra urged the people to celebrate by eating the fat portions<sup>175</sup>(112) and by drinking sweet drinks (cf. Cant 5:16). There was to be no bitterness on this day! They were also to send portions to those who had not had the opportunity, or the wherewithal, to prepare for this celebration. Joy in the Lord (objective genitive) is the best antidote for grieving (v. 10; cf. 1 Chr 16:27); it is a source of strength or defense against divine anger. The people heeded the urging of Ezra and the Levites and went home to feast and celebrate and to send portions to others. The reading of the law by Ezra and the teaching of the law by the Levites led to understanding and therefore to joy (v. 12).

This was the first time, according to Nehemiah 8:1, that during the Festival of Tabernacles people had built booths and lived in them since the time of Joshua (here spelled Jeshua), the son of Nun.<sup>176</sup>(114) The comparison of Joshua and Ezra may be an attempt to associate the occupation of the land with the need to observe the law, just as Joshua had made this connection at the conclusion of the first occupation of the land (Joshua 24:1). These booths were no longer merely the booths used by harvesters in the field; but, rather, they were now reminders of Israel's history with God during the forty years of the wilderness wandering. Failure to observe the Festival of Tabernacles correctly between the time of Joshua and that of Ezra was among Israel's many sins.

Nehemiah 8:1 focuses on how Ezra changed the law from a priestly concern to something that involved all the people.

Nehemiah 8:1 wrestles with the gap between Scripture and contemporary practice and calls readers to follow what is written.

We do well to note the theme of joy in this chapter, since we often connect law to legalism or to accusations against us. *Lex semper accusat!* (The law always accuses!) is a common

theological slogan in my own religious tradition. Reading and teaching the law led to understanding (8:8), but also to great joy (8:12). The first reaction to hearing the law was mourning and weeping, and from one point of view, that was a good and correct understanding, given the gap between Torah and the people's lives. But Ezra and the Levites stressed that this day was not a day of punishment, the fearsome day of the Lord. Rather, it was a day that was considered holy, or set apart, by God. It was, therefore, a time for celebrating and banqueting and thinking generously even of those who were not in attendance on this great day.

Is it joy *in* (Blenkinsopp) the Lord or joy *of* (NRSV, NIV, Williamson) the Lord that is strength? Probably both, but especially, I think, joy in the Lord. Joy in the Lord reflects dedication to God, commitment to God's ways and to God's Torah, faith and trust in God. If one wants refuge from the accusations of the Torah, one finds it in reliance on God.

Understanding led to obedience and, therefore, to great joy (8:17).

Real hearing embraces both connotations of the Hebrew word [mv (sAma()—hearing and obeying. Do we fully understand a text when we know the meaning of all the words and how they fit together in ancient genres and in ancient historical contexts? Or do we really understand a text only when it addresses us and calls us to joy in the Lord and to obedience to Torah?

The best obedience is not that of slaves before their master. Such obedience comes from fear and hatred and raw exercise of power. The obedience described in this chapter is total, involving all the assembly, and it is spontaneous and voluntary.

According to this prayer, the period of the judges, just as in the book of Judges itself, consisted of a series of cycles in which sin and punishment were followed by petition and deliverance. The period of the kings in vv. 29-31, just as in the books of Kings, consisted of a truncated cycle: repeated sins that eventually led to the loss of land. At the end of the books of Kings the reader may be tempted to ask: "If we were to cry out, would there not be deliverance for us?" In other words, an implied cycle of petition and deliverance is also there. In Nehemiah 9:1, too, after the historical retrospect come a petition (v. 32), a confession of sins (vv. 33-35), and a complaint about their present condition that functions as a kind of appeal for God to act based on pity for them (vv. 36-37). In short, the prayer asks for the cycle of deliverance to resume.

Abraham is selected by the author to represent the traditions of Israel's ancestors in Genesis 12:1-50. The prayer applies the word "chose" (rjb bAhar) to Abraham, based no doubt on the terminology of Deut 4:37; 10:15, although his election is described with other words in Genesis. The verb "brought out" (axy yAzA)), used of God's guidance of Abraham from his southern Mesopotamian home in Ur of the Chaldees (cf. Gen 11:28, 31; 15:7), suggests a kind of deliverance, or exodus, also for him (see Exod 20:2; 32:11-12). The reference to the gift of the name "Abraham" recalls Genesis 17:1, where God changed Abram's name to Abraham and Sarai's to Sarah to mark their new covenantal status. Abraham was faithful (cf.

the "righteousness" of Abram in Gen 15:6), and God made with him a covenant—the only covenant mentioned in this prayer—whose primary content was the promise of the land (see Gen 15:18-21; 17:7-8).

(9:12-21) God did not abandon them (vv. 17, 19), but in fact inaugurated a second era of providential guidance in the wilderness (vv. 19-21), which repeats the themes of vv. 12-15: the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire, the gift of God's good Spirit to instruct them (functionally the same as the giving of the law in vv. 13-14), and the provision of manna and water.

**9:32, Petition.** The transition point between historical retrospect and petition is marked by a transitional "now" (v. 32). God is addressed, even by those under judgment, as "our God," as in the first (reconstructed) line of the poem (v. 5). God is great, mighty, and awesome, but God is also, paradoxically, the one who keeps covenant and steadfast love, a reference to the covenantal promise of the land to Abraham in v. 8.

**9:33-37, Confession of Sin and Complaint.** Verse 33 has led to the classification of this prayer as a doxology of judgment: "God, you have been righteous in what you have done." God has acted truthfully, the poet says, but "we" have acted wickedly. We are as guilty as our ancestors.

The central truth about God is faithfulness to the people; this makes God a promise maker and a promise keeper. God's mercy is repeated in each generation and many times in one's own life. God's mercy is boundless and, paradoxically, has its limits. One should not expect sin and punishment, prayer to God, and deliverance to go on forever without any change in oneself.

**9:38–10:1, A Human Pledge.** "Because of all this" (9:38) refers to the reading of the law and the confessional prayer in chaps. 8–9,

Stewardship is much more than fund-raising. Real stewardship means a commitment to not abandon or neglect the house of our God—its worship life, its clergy, its building, its people. Such a firm agreement is real metanoia.

two other factors served to overrule this consideration on the present occasion: first, the day was "holy" to the Lord.  
two other factors served to overrule this consideration on the present occasion: first, the day was "holy" to the Lord.

Many of the specific pledges in 10:30-39 deal with the same issues that are treated in 5:11-12 and in chap.

13 and are an attempt to make the governor's temporary rulings permanent:

10:30, mixed marriages (cf. 13:23-30)

10:31a, the sabbath day (cf. 13:15-22)

10:31b, *the sabbath year and debts* (cf. 5:11-12)

10:32-33, one-third of a shekel offering

10:34, wood offering (cf. 13:31)

10:35-36, first fruits (cf. 13:31)

10:37-38, tithes (cf. 13:10-14)

10:39, not to neglect the house of God (cf. 13:11)

**Next Week: Repopulate with a Mission - 11:1-12:47**