

CHAPTER 8

INTRODUCTION TO NEHEMIAH 8

Ezra being desired to bring forth the book of the law, read it to the people and others, expounded it to them, (^{<4001>}Nehemiah 8:1-8) and Nehemiah exhorted the people to express joy and gladness on this occasion, which they did, (^{<4002>}Nehemiah 8:9-12) and observing the feast of tabernacles was in the law commanded to be observed, they kept it very strictly and joyfully, (^{<4003>}Nehemiah 8:13-18).

Ver. 1. *And all the people gathered themselves together as one man into the street that was before the watergate*, etc.] A large and commodious street for such a company of people, which led to the water gate, of which (see ^{<4005>}Nehemiah 3:26) hither the people gathered with great unanimity, zeal, and affection:

and they spoke unto Ezra the scribe; the same who is called Ezra the priest, and scribe of the law of God, and said to be a ready one, (^{<4006>}Ezra 7:6,11,12), who came to Jerusalem thirteen years before this time; but very probably returned to Babylon again, and was lately come from thence:

to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded to Israel; to observe what was commanded in it, and which he had ordered to be read, particularly every seventh year, at the feast of tabernacles, (^{<4010>}Deuteronomy 31:10,11) which was now drawing near, though this was not the precise time of reading it; hence some have thought this year was the sabbatical year; (see ^{<4011>}Nehemiah 5:11).

Ver. 2. *And Ezra the priest brought the law before the congregation*, etc.] Having a perfect copy of it, which the people knew, and therefore desired him to bring it; he brought it either out of his own case or chest, or out of the temple where it was laid up; some restrain this to the book of Deuteronomy; this he produced in sight of the whole assembly:

both of men and women; adult persons of each sex, who met promiscuously; though Grotius thinks the women had a separate place:

and all that could hear with understanding; all under age, who yet were capable of hearing the law read to some advantage to them:

upon the first day of the seventh month; the month Tisri, answering to part of September and October; this was a high day, for not only the first of every month was a festival, but the first of the seventh month was the feast of blowing of trumpets, (^{<R23>}Leviticus 23:24), and besides, this was New Year's day, the first day of their civil year, as the first of Nisan was of their ecclesiastical year, and was of greater antiquity than that; and so Jarchi says, this was the first day of the year; to which may be added, that this was the day on which the altar was first set up, on the Jews' return from captivity, (^{<R6>}Ezra 3:6).

Ver. 3. *And he read therein*, etc.] Some passages in it, here and there, which it was necessary the people should have knowledge of; for it can hardly be thought be began and read on just in the order in which it was: this he did

before the street; at the top of it, at one end of it:

that was before the water gate; which looked directly to that:

from the morning until midday; from the rising of the sun to noon, so that he must read six hours; but very probably was relieved at times by the men with him, after mentioned:

before the men and the women, and those that could understand; (see ^{<R2>}Nehemiah 8:2),

and the ears of all the people were attentive unto the book of the law; to the hearing of it read, and to the things contained in it; hence Maimonides ^{f46} gathers, that as soon as the reader begins the reading of the law, it is not lawful to speak about anything, not even the constitutions of the law, but silently to attend to what is read.

Ver. 4. *And Ezra the scribe stood upon a pulpit of wood, which they had made for the purpose*, etc.] Or to speak out of, as the Syriac and Arabic versions; this, in the Hebrew text, is called a "tower" ^{f47}, partly because of its height, and partly because in the form of one; and also for its largeness, considering the use it was for; for it was so large as to hold fourteen men, as appears by what follows: a pulpit of wood was made for the king in the court, to read the law from ^{f48}; though, according to Jacob Leo, it was a

throne like an high tower, (See Gill on “~~2~~2 Kings 11:14”), the pulpits, in the Jewish synagogues, made after the same manner, as Aben Ezra observes, are called by the same ^{f49} name:

and beside him stood Mattithiah, and Shema, and Anaiah; and Urijah, and Hilkiah, and Maaseiah, on his right hand; and on his left hand, Pedaiah, and Mishael, and Malchiah, and Hashum, and Hashbadana, Zechariah, and Meshullam; in all thirteen; there were six on his right, and seven on his left, who stood here, not merely in honour to him, and as approvers and supporters of the truth of what he read, but to relieve him when weary.

Ver. 5. *And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people (for he was above all the people),* etc.] So plainly seen by them, and what he did, and the more easily heard, for which purpose the pulpit was made for him to stand in:

and, when he opened it, all the people stood up; that they might the better hear the law read, as well as in honour and reverence of it; the Jews say ^{f50}, that from the times of Moses to Rabban Gamaliel, they learned the law only standing; but after his death a disease came into the world, and they learned it sitting; and now it is a canon with them, that it is not necessary to stand at the reading of the law ^{f51}.

Ver. 6. *And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God,* etc.] Before he began to read in the book of the law, he addressed himself to God in a short prayer, wholly in the benedictory way; ascribing blessing, honour, and glory to him, celebrating his being and perfections, setting forth his greatness and his excellency, who was the author and giver of the law he was about to read; and this he the rather did, that what he read might be the more carefully attended to, and come with the greater authority, weight, and influence on those that heard it; and so, Maimonides ^{f52} says, it is the custom with the Jews, in their synagogues, for the reader, after he has opened the book, and looked out the place he reads, to say this blessing,

“Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the world, who hath chosen us out of all people, and hath given us his law; blessed art thou, O Lord, who hast given us the law; and all the people answer, Amen;”

as they now did, as follows:

and all the people answered, Amen, Amen: repeating the word, to declare their hearty assent to what Ezra had expressed; the Jews have many rules concerning pronouncing the “Amen”, that it must not be too quick, curt, and short, nor with too high a voice ^{f53}:

with lifting up their hands; a prayer gesture, to which the apostle refers, (~~5118~~ 1 Timothy 2:8),

and they bowed their heads, and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground; expressing hereby the awful sense they had of the Divine Being, and their profound adoration of him.

Ver. 7. *Also Jeshua, and Bani, and Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodijah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, and the Levites,* etc.] That is, others of them besides those named; for they seem all to be Levites, unless they can be thought to be priests, and so the Levites are distinguished from them; but the former seems evident from (~~4104~~ Nehemiah 9:4-6) these also

caused the people to understand the law; as well as Ezra; from whence it is plain that he did not only read the law, but gave the sense of it, especially where there was any seeming difficulty, and these men were assisting in the same work: and the people stood in their place; to hear the law read and explained; they did not move from their first station, but continued in it from morning to noon; they were both attentive and constant.

Ver. 8. *So they read in the book,* etc.] Ezra and those with him; he first began to read and expound, and when weary they relieved him, and did the same:

in the law of God distinctly; which was the book they read in, and which they read plainly and intelligibly, so as to be heard and understood; this seems to respect the clear and distinct pronunciation of the words of it, and not the explanation or meaning of it, which is after expressed; some think the sense is, that they first read it in Hebrew, and then translated it into Chaldee, that the people might better understand it, being just come out of Babylon, where they had been used to the Chaldee language; but though this was a practice in later times, it does not seem to have obtained so early, or that there was a necessity of it:

and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading; not hereby how to read it, but chiefly to understand what was read, that they

might clearly know their duty to God and men: the Talmudists ^{f54} give the meaning of the text thus; “by the law of God” they understand the Scripture; by the phrase “distinctly”, the Targum or translation of it into Chaldee; by “the sense”, the verses or the accents; and by “the reading”, the distinction of the accents: some think from hence came the practice of reading the law in the synagogues every sabbath day, (^{<4435>}Acts 13:15 15:21).

Ver. 9. *And Nehemiah which is the Tirshatha*, etc.] Or governor, as Zerubbabel had been, and now Nehemiah, (see ^{<4576>}Ezra 2:63)

and Ezra the priest and scribe; (see ^{<4681>}Nehemiah 8:1,2),

and the Levites that taught the people; (see ^{<4687>}Nehemiah 8:7)

said unto all the people, this day is holy unto the Lord your God; being both the new moon and the feast of blowing of trumpets:

mourn not, nor weep; which was unsuitable to a festival, and especially such an one as this, in which trumpets were to be blown, and gladness to be shown, (^{<4400>}Numbers 10:10)

for all the people wept when they heard the words of the law; perceiving they had not kept it, but had broke it in many instances, and so liable to the wrath and judgment of God in case of disobedience.

Ver. 10. *Then he said unto them*, etc.] Nehemiah the Tirshatha or governor:

go your way; to their own houses, and refresh themselves; it being noon, and they had stood many hours attentive to the reading and expounding of the law:

eat the fat, and drink the sweet: not a common meal, but a feast, consisting of the richest provisions, the best of food and liquors

and send portions unto them for whom nothing is prepared; for the poor, who had no food at home provided for them; the widow, fatherless, and stranger, who at festivals were to partake of the entertainment, (^{<4561>}Deuteronomy 16:11)

for this day is holy unto our Lord: neither be you sorry; confirming what the Levites had said and exhorted to, (^{<4689>}Nehemiah 8:9)

for the joy of the Lord is your strength; to rejoice, as the Lord commanded them on such days as these, was a means both of increasing their bodily strength and their inward strength, and of fitting them the more to perform their duty to God and men with cheerfulness, which sorrow and heaviness made unfit for; and the joy which has the Lord for its object, and comes from him, is the cause of renewing spiritual strength, so as to run and not be weary, walk and not faint, in the ways of God.

Ver. 11. *So the Levites stilled all the people*, etc.] Made them quiet and easy, being backed by the governor:

saying, hold your peace; refrain from weeping and mourning:

for the day is holy; a festival, set apart for joy and gladness:

neither be ye grieved; inwardly; as they were not to show any signs of sorrow outwardly, so they were not to cherish grief inwardly.

Ver. 12. *And all the people went their way to eat and to drink*, etc.] Freely and cheerfully:

and to send portions; to the poor, who had nothing to eat and drink:

and to make great mirth; with music, vocal and instrumental:

because they had understood the words that were declared unto them; the meaning of the several laws read and explained unto them, whereby they better understood their duty, and in what instances and in what manner it was to be performed; how much more reason is there for joy and gladness, when the Gospel, and the doctrines of it, are clearly known and understood? (~~1885~~ Psalm 89:15,16).

Ver. 13. *And on the second day were gathered together*, etc.] The second day of the month, and of the new year, the day after the feast of blowing of trumpets, and after the law had been read and explained:

the chief of the fathers of all the people: heads of tribes and families: the priests and the Levites; who, though they were instructors of others, needed to be taught themselves, of which they were sensible: and therefore came

unto Ezra the scribe, even to understand the words of the law; some things in it, which, upon reading the day before, they observed had some difficulty in them, and which they did not clearly and thoroughly understand; and

therefore applied to Ezra, a ready scribe in the law, for better information, and that they might be better able to teach the people; which was highly commendable in them.

Ver. 14. *And they found written in the law which the Lord had commanded by Moses,* etc.] The children of Israel, to be observed by them; either by hearing it read the day before, or by conversation with Ezra, they perceived it was enjoined in the law, particularly in (^{<RE33>}Leviticus 23:39-43 ^{<5163>}Deuteronomy 16:13)

that the children of Israel should dwell in booths, in the feast of the seventh month: which was the same month, and this the second day of it, and therefore the time drew near for keeping it; for it was to begin the fifteenth.

Ver. 15. *And that they should publish and proclaim in all their cities, and in Jerusalem,* etc.] That is, as Jarchi interprets it, by supplying it thus,

and they commanded that they should publish, etc. Ezra and those with him gave orders that heralds should proclaim in all cities where the Jews dwelt that the feast of tabernacles would be kept, and they should prepare for it; and which seems to be the true sense, since it is not written in the law that such a proclamation should be made; but this was an order of their own, thereby to give notice of it, that all might be provided:

go forth unto the mount, and fetch olive branches, and pine branches, and myrtle branches, and palm branches, and branches of thick trees, to make booths, as it is written; in (^{<RE34>}Leviticus 23:40), where the first three of these seem to be called boughs of goodly trees; though the Jews ^{f55} commonly understand them of pomecitrons, of which the Syriac version here interprets the myrtle branches; and by them are meant the citron branches, with the leaves and fruit, and which the Jews make absolutely necessary to the keeping of the feast, and for beautiful ones will give a large price; some of them go every year to Spain, and buy as many as they can, and dispose of them wherever Jews live ^{f56}; and those branches were to be fetched, not properly speaking to make the booths of, which were made of boards and planks, but for the decoration of them; and it was not necessary, according to Aben Ezra, that some of each of these should be gathered for that purpose, but of any sort of them; for he interprets the words disjunctively olive branches, or pine branches, or myrtle branches, etc. these, according to the common notion of the Jews, were tied up in

little bundles, and carried in the hand, which they call “lulabs”; and they observe ^{f57}, the thick branches were for them, which included the rest; now these they were to fetch from the mount of Olives, and other mountains about Jerusalem; near to which also there was a place called Motza ^{f58}; whither they went, and gathered the willows of the brook mentioned in (^{<1023>}Leviticus 23:39).

Ver. 16. *So the people went forth, and brought them*, etc.] Went out of Jerusalem to the mountains adjacent, and fetched in branches of the said trees, one or another:

and made themselves booths, everyone upon the roof of his house; which were flat, (^{<1021>}Deuteronomy 22:8), and they might be made anywhere, so be it they were open to the air:

and in their courts, and in the courts of the house of God; the common people in the courtyards belonging to their houses, and the priests and Levites in the courts of the temple, the yards or open places adjoining to them:

and in the street of the watergate; which led to that, and seems to have been a very large street, in which many booths might be built, (^{<1015>}Nehemiah 3:26 8:3)

and in the street of the gate of Ephraim; which led to the gate through which the road lay to the tribe of Ephraim, (see ^{<1243>}2 Kings 14:13), none were erected without the walls of the city, for fear of the enemy.

Ver. 17. *And all the congregation of them that were come again out of captivity made booths*, etc.] These came to Jerusalem, and made them booths there; for there only was this feast kept, (see ^{<1010>}John 7:2,10),

and sat under the booths; there they dwelt during the seven days of it, in commemoration of their ancestors dwelling in booths in the wilderness, (see ^{<1022>}Leviticus 23:42,43)

for since the days of Jeshua the son of Nun unto that day had not the children of Israel done so; Joshua observed it, when he had brought and settled the people of Israel in the land of Canaan; and it had been observed since, before this time, as appears from (^{<1100>}1 Kings 8:2,65,66) (^{<1514>}Ezra 3:4); but not so, with such exactness, with such zeal and affection, with such a regard to the law of God, as to read it every day of the feast, as in

the next verse, and with such joy and gladness; wherefore there is no reason to suspect a corruption in the text, as a learned man^{f59} does, who supposes that Joshua is put for Josiah:

and there was very great gladness; that they were restored unto and settled in their land, had the book of the law, and the knowledge of it, and were directed and enabled to observe it.

Ver. 18. *Also day by day, from the first day unto the last day, he read in the book of the law of God*, etc.] That is, Ezra; this was done by him every day during the feast, whereas only the first and last days were the holy convocations on which it seems to have been read:

and they kept the feast seven days, and on the eighth day was a solemn assembly, according to the manner; prescribed in (^{Leviticus} Leviticus 23:39).