

## Chapter Eight

### PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

1. Whose idea was it to read the Law?
2. How long did the reading continue, on the first day? Any other days?
3. What happened when the Law was read? What did it cause the people to do?
4. What do you suppose a visitor to the city would have noticed during this time?

### OUTLINE

- II. The Law is Read in Public, and its Ceremonies are Resumed: chapters 8-10
  - A. The Law is Read and the Feast of Booths is Kept.
    1. Ezra instructs the people in the Law (vss. 1-8).
    2. The people celebrate with joy and feasting (vss. 9-12).
    3. The Feast of Booths is rediscovered (vss. 13-18).

### TEXT AND VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENT

- II. The Law is Read in Public, and its Ceremonies are Resumed: chapters 8-10
  - A. The Law is Read and the Feast of Booths is Kept.
    1. Ezra instructs the people in the Law.

#### TEXT, 8:1-8

- 1 And all the people gathered as one man at the square which was in front of the Water Gate, and they asked Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses which the LORD had given to Israel.
- 2 Then Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly of men, women, and all who could listen with understanding, on the first day of the seventh month.
- 3 And he read from it before the square which was in front of the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of men and women, those who could understand;

- and all the people were attentive to the book of the law.
- 4 And Ezra the scribe stood at a wooden podium which they had made for the purpose. And beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah on his right hand; and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam on his left hand.
  - 5 And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people for he was standing above all the people, and when he opened it, all the people stood up.
  - 6 Then Ezra blessed the LORD the great God. And all the people answered, "Amen, Amen!" while lifting up their hands; then they bowed low and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.
  - 7 Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiiah, and the Levites, explained the law to the people while the people remained in their place.
  - 8 And they read from the book, from the law of God, translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading.

## COMMENT

The highlight of this chapter is the reading of God's word. Dr. Ironside,<sup>1</sup> in writing on this chapter, notes that "In every genuine revival . . . the revealed Word of God has had a large place." He points to several examples, including the Reformation and its emphasis on translating and publishing the Bible to make it a book of the people.

*Verse 1* speaks of the people's assembly "as one man," referring to their unanimity of purpose rather than their 100% attendance. The assembly was at a city square, not the Temple, suggesting that it arose out of popular demand instead of religious command. Observe also that the people made the request that the Law of Moses be brought and read to them. Nehemiah is in the background now, and Ezra is on the stage. Interestingly, *The Cambridge*

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1. Ironside, *op. cit.*, p. 87. His seven-point outline of this chapter is delightful, though a bit fanciful.

*Bible* sees the people striking a blow against the monopoly of religion by the priests.<sup>2</sup> The *Expositor's Bible* sees just the opposite. "As the civil ruler thus takes a lower ground in the presence of the religious leader, we seem to be anticipating those days of the triumph of the Church when a king would stand like a groom, to hold the horse of a pope."<sup>3</sup> Why see conflict in it? Perhaps Ezra and Nehemiah were working together in harmony. Evidently Ezra was known to them, and he was the logical one to go to with their request. This is the first mention of him in Nehemiah.

There had evidently been an ebb in the spiritual conditions during the twelve years since the close of Ezra's book. Some suppose that this could only be accounted for if Ezra had returned to Babylon during this time, returning only for this occasion. Others believe that his work had been effective only briefly.

The people's reverence for the Word is seen in their conviction that their Lord had given it to His people Israel; they were the People of the Book.

*Verse 2* indicates the extensive interest in the reading: men, women, and all who could understand. This is presumed to include children, but it also may be translated, "from man to woman, that is, all who (are able) to hear with discernment." Similar phraseology in *verse 3* also does not necessitate the presence of children, though it is possible to translate the passages to include them. Even the involvement of women in a religious service or festival in the O.T. was rare; this was indeed an exceptional occasion.

The date, the first day of the seventh month, may have been significant for two reasons. It was the date for the Feast of Trumpets (Lev. 23:23ff, Ezra 3:1), though its name is never mentioned and one wonders if any but the religious leaders were conscious of this (cf. vss. 9, 10). Also, the first day of every month was holy and was marked by the joyous sound of trumpets (Num. 10:10).

*Verse 3* implies that the book of the law from which Ezra read

2. *Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges*, *op. cit.*, p. 241.

3. Walter F. Adenay, *Expositor's Bible*, "Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther," p. 274.

was of extensive length; it required five or six hours, from dawn to noon. The verses that follow indicate, however, that much of the time may have been taken up by explanation and even discussion. The attention of the people was noteworthy enough to deserve special comment.

*Verses 4-8* expand the information given in *verse 3*.

*Verse 4* is the first mention in the Bible of a raised platform constructed for speaking. It was built large enough to accommodate fourteen men; these others probably assisted Ezra in the reading, since *verse 7* gives an entirely different list of those who did the teaching and explaining. Or they may have been there to add their testimony and influence to the occasion. That these men were laymen is suggested by several factors. (1) They are not identified as priests or Levites as the men in *verse 7* are. (2) Their names do not appear in any of the lists of priests or Levites elsewhere in the book. (3) This was, as noted in *verse 1*, a popular meeting rather than a religious one, and the leaders therefore were probably from among the people.

*Versè 5* gives a reason for the raised platform, that the people might see. It also indicates that the people stood in reverence when the Law was opened up. It is not clear from this passage whether they continued to stand as the scroll was being read.

In *versè 6* the expression, "the great God," is taken to reflect Babylonian influence;<sup>4</sup> the two words appear elsewhere in the Bible, but always with another adjective between. Whatever its source, it is a reverent and true designation. The lifting of hands could indicate petition (Lam. 2:19; Psa. 141:2); blessing (Psa. 134:2); affirmation or oath (Gen. 14:22 footnote); note particularly its association here with "Amen." Bowing with faces lowered indicated adoration.

*Verse 7* gives the names of teachers on this occasion. The "and" should probably be omitted (this is permissible on the basis of the Hebrew), particularly since several of these names can be identified as Levites from other sources, in 12:8 for example. The Levites were given the responsibility in the Law to teach their brethren.

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4. *Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. III, p. 736.

The last phrase, "remained in their place," could be translated "stood."

In *verse 8* it appears that the thirteen mentioned in the previous verse participated in the reading of the Scripture, and made explanations or translations as they went along. It is possible that they took turns reading and speaking. It is also possible that the assembly divided into smaller classes or discussion groups, with one in charge of each, thus giving each person an opportunity to pry until he completely understood a passage. Some see this verse as evidence that the exiles returned speaking Aramaic instead of Hebrew, and therefore the older text had to be translated for their understanding. Others note that Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi were written to the Jewish people after the Captivity, and they are in Hebrew; therefore exposition of the Scriptures is involved here. It is known that they had adopted Aramaic, the more general dialect of the area, by the time the N.T. was written,<sup>5</sup> but not before Jerusalem had resisted the onslaught of Assyrian armies after the fall of Samaria (II Ki. 18:26).

## 2. The people celebrate with joy and feasting.

### TEXT, 8:9-12

- 9 Then 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 were weeping when they heard the words of the law.
- 10 Then he said to them, "Go, eat of the fat, drink of the sweet, and send portions to him who has nothing prepared; for this day is holy to our LORD. Do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

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5. This is a point that Joseph Smith overlooked when he had Jesus speaking an Aramaic word (Raca, 3 Nephi 12:22) to the supposed descendants of immigrants to America who had left Jerusalem before the Captivity, when they were still speaking Hebrew. See comments following Ezra 4:7, page 52.

- 11 So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, "Be still, for the day is holy, do not be grieved."
- 12 And all the people went away to eat, to drink, to send portions and to celebrate a great festival, because they understood the words which had been made known to them.

### COMMENT

In *verse 9* the people wept, apparently at their shortcomings now revealed by the reading of the Law. But Nehemiah, Ezra, and the Levites all acted together in asking the people to cease, because the occasion was to be one of joy. (Note the comments on *verse 1* dealing with Ezra's and Nehemiah's working together in harmony.) Every Jewish feast was unsuited for sorrow (Dt. 12:7, 12); it is noteworthy that all but one of Israel's holy days were feasts instead of fasts; theirs was to be a religion of joy. But this was especially true of the Feast of Trumpets or of the first of the month; note again Num. 10:10.

One reason which has been suggested for this joy prescribed in the Law was to counteract the Canaanite weeping for Tammuz.<sup>6</sup> The women planted anemones ("pleasant plants") as reminders of the god Tammuz, whose death brought on the winter. Then every Spring, when the new green shoots came from the anemone bulb, supposedly marking the god's return to life, they rejoiced and staged an orgiastic celebration to assure the fertility of the soil. But there are also enough positive reasons in Judaism for their rejoicing frequently before God.

In *verse 10* the method of celebration, by feasting and sharing, is part of the pattern for their festivals, specifically the Feast of Weeks and Booths (Dt. 16:11, 14). The fat part of the meat would be regarded as the daintiest morsels, the most tender; it would be rich food compared to their ordinary fare. It is estimated that in their culture meat was a luxury enjoyed only once every few weeks. The sweet would refer to any sweet drink, of the vine, or

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6. *Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. III, p. 738.

other fruit or honeyed juices, especially unfermented. (The word is related to "unleavened": see Word Studies, Ezra 6.) The food was shared not only with the poor but with any of the people who had not prepared any. Their delight in the Lord would give them strength. There is a power that comes through joy.

In *verse 11* the Levites are portrayed as marshals, keeping order at the feast.

*Verse 12* indicates that the people caught the significance of the command to rejoice.

### 3. The Feast of Tabernacles, or Booths, is rediscovered.

#### TEXT, 8:13-18

- 13 Then on the second day the heads of fathers' households of all the people, the priests, and the Levites were gathered to Ezra the scribe that they might gain insight into the words of the law.
- 14 And they found written in the law how the LORD had commanded through Moses that the sons of Israel should live in booths during the feast of the seventh month.
- 15 So they proclaimed and circulated a proclamation in all their cities and in Jerusalem, saying, "Go out to the hills, and bring olive branches, and wild olive branches, myrtle branches, palm branches, and branches of other leafy trees, to make booths, as it is written."
- 16 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.
- 17 And the entire assembly of those who had returned from the captivity made booths and lived in them. The sons of Israel had indeed not done so from the days of Joshua the son of Nun to that day. And there was great rejoicing.
- 18 And he read from the book of the law of God daily, from the first day to the last day. And they celebrated the feast seven days, and on the eighth day there was a solemn assembly according to the ordinance.

## COMMENT

*Verse 13* describes a more restricted session the following day, not for the total assembly but for the heads of households or clans, the priests, and the Levites: those leaders, both religious and secular, who would need to know the laws so that they could enforce or apply them. Ezra was their special instructor.

According to *verse 14*, it was at this point that they discovered a detail which had been overlooked for many centuries (cf. vs. 17) concerning the Feast of Booths, which began on the fifteenth day of the seventh month. The feast itself had been kept; it is noted in particular in Ezra 3:4; but the people had not been building their temporary living quarters out of branches, in imitation of the living accommodations during the Wilderness Wanderings, as specified in the Law (Lev. 23:40-43).

The story goes immediately in *verse 15* to the gathering of foliage to begin this celebration. Some writers<sup>7</sup> have expressed concern that no mention is made of the Day of Atonement, the one fast day in Israel's calendar (Lev. 23:27-32), which would come on the tenth day. This does not necessarily mean that it wasn't held; there may only have been a lack of any significant departure from regular practice, thus no comment was needed.

It is also noted that the kind of branches which they were told to gather corresponds only in a general way with the instructions in Lev. 23:40; but perhaps that list was not understood to be exclusive, but only suggestive. The Law was never interpreted in an exclusivistic, legalistic manner until the Pharisees so employed it, under Roman influence.

The reader of *verse 16* will be able to imagine a most unusual transformation in the appearance of Jerusalem as these leafy shelters sprang up everywhere: people constructed them on their flat roofs or in their yards; priests and Levites were probably the ones who raised theirs in the Temple courtyard; the homeless, or visitors from surrounding cities, probably filled the public square; in and around the gate on the road to Ephraim would be

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7. *Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges, op. cit.*, p. 250.



a natural place for the travelers to erect their booths.

*Verse 17* speaks of the total participation of all who had returned from the Captivity, whether they lived in Jerusalem or not. This particular feature of building brush shelters was what had not been done since Joshua's day; note the use of tents in II Chr. 7:10. The building of a booth is a feature of Jewish celebration in America today.<sup>8</sup> The result of keeping God's Law was joy.

The daily reading of the Law throughout the feast is taken to indicate that this was a Sabbatical Year (Dt. 31:10f). But, judging from the previous tone, it might have been a spontaneous thing which required no command for it to be carried out. They may have wanted to celebrate the feast in the fullest way possible. The assembly on the additional eighth day was also according to Divine pattern (Lev. 23:36).

## WORD STUDIES

**AMEN** (vs. 6: pronounced in Hebrew the same as in English): the basic idea is of something firm, like a foundation or support or pillar of a building. A thing which is built on a firm foundation is "durable" and "lasting." A person of this kind would be "faithful"; his conduct and his words would be "true."

In Neh. 10:1 this same word forms the base of the word translated **DOCUMENT**: something confirmed and sure.

**UNDERSTAND** (vss. 2, 8: Bin): separate, distinguish. It indicates "discerning" or "understanding" as they are dependent on the power of separating or distinguishing or discriminating. Intelligence and wisdom are dependent on this.

The preposition translated "between" is derived from this word.

## SUMMARY

After the completion of the wall, the people (both men and women) gathered at a public square within the city and asked Ezra

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8. Philip S. Bernstein, *What The Jews Believe*, p. 35ff.

to read God's Law to them. This was done in the Fall of the year, on the first day of their seventh month, the month which contained more religious holy days than any other. Ezra and others read and explained the Law beginning at dawn and continuing till noon. The rest of the day was occupied with feasting, sharing, and fellowship, in a spirit of joy.

The next day some of the leaders assembled with Ezra for more specific instruction, and in the process of their studies discovered a command concerning the Feast of Booths, scheduled for the middle of the month, which they had been neglecting. They gathered branches and built temporary brush shelters.

### REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Who read the Law to the people?
2. What special preparations were made for the occasion?
3. What feast in particular was mentioned?
4. What was unusual about the manner in which they kept the feast?