

Triennial Torah Study – 3rd Year 26/01/2013



sightedmoon.com /triennial-torah-study-3rd-year-04042015 /

By Joseph F. Dumond

This week's Triennial Torah reading can be found at:

<https://sightedmoon.com/files/TriennialCycleBeginningAviv.pdf>

Deut 2		Neh 8-10	2 Cori n 8-9
--------	--	----------	--------------

God Is in Control (Deuteronomy 2)

In spite of the fact that the Israelites, because of their sin and subsequent punishment, had to wander in the wilderness for 40 years, unable to enter the Promised Land, they were still being cared for and provided for by God (verse 7). Once “all the men of war had finally perished from among the people” (verse 16), God gave command to the new generation to begin to conquer the land (verse 24). He made clear, however, that it was He who was in ultimate control of events (verse 25), so that no flesh would glory before Him. In fact, God hardened the heart of King Sihon to provoke him into fighting against Israel (verses 30, 32). And God delivered him and his cities, as well as other specifically designated cities, into the hands of Israel (verses 33, 36).

At God's command, the Israelites “utterly destroyed the men, women, and little ones of every city” (verse 34). Passages like these have led many readers to conclude that the God of the Old Testament was harsh and cruel, in contrast to Jesus Christ, who is thought of as gentle and meek. The fact is, however, that it was the preincarnate Jesus Christ Himself who appeared to and gave this command to Moses (see 1 Corinthians 10:). It was He, the Giver of life who created mankind at the Father's behest (compare Hebrews 1:1-2; John 1:3; Colossians 1:16; Ephesians 3:9), who rightly ordered taking the life of certain people. It appears that in God's infinite wisdom, He decided that, rather than the children of that evil, demon-worshipping society continuing to live in misery and pain, it was better for them to die and later be resurrected to physical life in a better world in which His right way of life would be taught to everyone and enforced throughout the earth (see Revelation 20:5, 11-12; “The Last Great Day: Eternal Life Offered to All,” God's Holy Day Plan: The Promise of Hope for All Mankind, 1999, pp. 51-57). Of course, the prerogative to take human life belongs solely to God. Only He has the right to kill a person or command someone else to do so.

Nehemiah 8

Returning to Nehemiah 8, Ezra is called on to read to the people from the Book of the Law of

Moses. Exactly what the term Book of the Law specifies is debated. Some see it as the entire Pentateuch—the five books of Moses. Others view it as just Deuteronomy. Still others see it as certain sections of Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy. Since Joshua wrote of the Shechem covenant near the end of his life in the Book of the Law (see Joshua 24:25-26), it seems that the book may have encompassed more than what is written in the Pentateuch. Following Ezra's reading, the history recounted afterward in Nehemiah 9 could argue for understanding the Book of the Law in the broad sense of the whole Pentateuch and perhaps even more of Scripture. Whatever the case, Ezra reads to the people for five or six hours, as the word translated "morning" in Nehemiah 8:3 actually specifies "dawn" as the starting point. He continues on until about noon, and the people remain attentive.

As the Law is presented, the Levites help the people to understand it (verses 7-8). The wording here is interesting. Rabbinic tradition maintains that the Levites were here translating the less familiar ancient Hebrew into Aramaic, the common language of the people since the exile in Babylon. And perhaps the phrase translated "gave the sense" does have that meaning—along with possibly explaining outdated idioms and other archaic usages. (Indeed, those skeptics who argue that the Mosaic Law was a priestly invention during the time of Ezra should note that this passage seems to show the Law as a very old document even then.) Yet the phrase that follows, "helped them to understand the reading," may well have referred to some expounding on how to apply the principles and lessons contained in the Law.

On hearing the Law, the people sink into weeping—evidently sorrowful over their failure to live up to its demands. Gauging from this reaction, it seems to have been a long time since the Law was read. It could be that the command to read it every seventh year at the Feast of Tabernacles was being followed (see Deuteronomy 31:9-13) and that it was now seven years since the previous reading. And it may be, if the book is not arranged chronologically, that this whole episode was following the serious lapses of chapter 13, which we will read later.

Though Nehemiah, Ezra and the Levites were no doubt glad to see such widespread heartfelt contrition, they nevertheless pointed out the need for the people to strive to refrain from weeping at this time so as to rejoice in God's Holy Day (Nehemiah 8:9-12). The people are encouraged to indulge in fine food and drink and to share with others in need. If the events of chapter 8 followed the completion of the wall by only a few days, as the scriptural arrangement would seem to imply, then there would have been a lot of people in need at this time, given that Nehemiah would have only just instituted his economic reforms of chapter 5 within the past two months.

It is wonderful to see the leaders of the people coming again the next day with a desire to learn more of the Law (verse 13). These leaders were likely being given specialized instruction so as to be able to in turn teach those over whom they served. As they listen, the reading comes to Leviticus 23, which mentions dwelling in booths and the gathering of branches as part of celebrating the Feast of Tabernacles (verses 40, 42-43; compare Nehemiah 8:14-15), the term "tabernacles" denoting booths—temporary shelters. Again, this feast is not named in Nehemiah

8 either. It is simply called the “feast of the seventh month” (verse 14) and said to last seven days with a sacred assembly on the eighth day (verse 18; compare Leviticus 23:33-36, 39).

It is surprising to read in Nehemiah 8:17 that the nation had not made temporary shelters and dwelt under them since the time of Joshua. Clearly, the Feast of Tabernacles had been observed in the intervening centuries, such as under Solomon (see 1 Kings 8:65; 2 Chronicles 7:9) and even more recently under Zerubbabel (see Ezra 3:4). How is it, then, that the Israelites had not constructed booths out of branches for more than 900 years even during times of national faithfulness? It could be that many had but that the “whole assembly” (see again Nehemiah 8:17) had not done so since Joshua’s time. Another explanation may be that Leviticus 23 does not explicitly state that the branches are to be used for such construction. It merely states that the people were to gather branches and, mentioned separately, that they were to dwell in temporary dwellings. Perhaps those in intervening centuries understood their temporary housing in Jerusalem as meeting the Feast’s requirement or, as Judaism today teaches, that booths could be made with other materials—with the branches simply carried in worship and used for festival decoration. According to this explanation, the Jews at the time of Ezra and Nehemiah come to see the branches as construction material for the booths and reinstitute a practice not seen since Joshua’s day. In any case, it is clear from Jewish tradition that the people at some point began carrying branches about as part of their worship during the festival—as observant Jews still do today.

The Feast in Nehemiah 8 is observed with exuberant gladness, reminiscent of the great joy at the renewal of the Passover under Hezekiah (2 Chronicles 30:26) and at the revival under Josiah (2 Kings 23:22; 2 Chronicles 35:18). This was a wonderful time, with the Book of the Law being read from each day (Nehemiah 8:18). Indeed, God’s law brings great joy—in understanding the truth, and much more in living by it.

Moreover, there was a rebuilt city wall for which to be thankful. Indeed, whether the fall festivals of chapter 8 came the next month after the completion of the city wall or many years later after its rededication, the chapter arrangement fits thematically either way. The autumn festival period represents the time when Jesus Christ will return to the earth to defend His people, restore them and their land and set up His rule from Jerusalem. There was a small prototype of this in the mission of Nehemiah. Furthermore, when Christ returns He will lead Judah and Israel in spiritual reformation. That too is prefigured in the national turning to God at the reading of His law in Nehemiah 8 and the commitment of the people as related in the next two chapters along with Nehemiah’s reforms described later in the book.

The Levites’ Psalm (Nehemiah 9)

On the 24th day of the seventh month, two days after the sacred assembly following the Feast of Tabernacles, the people gather in public fasting and repentance (verses 1-2; compare 8:18). This was just two weeks after a commanded holy fast day, the Day of Atonement, which the people would have observed on the 10th day of the seventh month, between the Feast of

Trumpets and the Feast of Tabernacles. For just as the leaders on the second day of the month had read about the Feast of Tabernacles in Leviticus 23 (see Nehemiah 8:13-15), they would also have read about the Day of Atonement at the same time, since it too is described in Leviticus 23 (as well as in Leviticus 16). Perhaps, in learning much more of the Law through the Feast of Tabernacles, the people came to see that they had much more about which to repent. Moreover, the fast on the 24th was preparatory to an official renewal of the covenant relationship with God, as explained in Nehemiah 9:38 and chapter 10. Jesus taught that His followers should fast (Matthew 9:15), clearly referring to more than just the annual fast of the Day of Atonement (although Christians also continued to observe this commanded fast, as alluded to in Acts 27:9). Fasting is a way to clear the mind of distractions and give concentrated thought to spiritual matters.

Verse 2 mentions the children of Israel having separated themselves from all foreigners (see also 10:28). While this could simply refer to the Jews distinguishing themselves from the pagan world around them, some who view chapters 8-10 as falling later in Nehemiah's governorship see the separation as a reference to ending the intermarriage problems described later in the book (see Nehemiah 10:30; 13:3, 23-30). Foreigners were welcomed in Israel, so long as they adopted the worship of the true God and forsook their pagan religions entirely. Circumcision of their males demonstrated their commitment to God (Exodus 12:43-49). Whatever the case, the intent was to serve as the special, distinct people God intended His nation to be.

On this special fast day, the Book of the Law was read for about three hours, and another three hours were spent in congregational worship (9:3).

In verse 5, a group of Levites give a call to praise: "Stand up and bless the LORD your God forever and ever." Some see these words as the commencement of a psalm that continues to the end of the chapter. Others see them as simply calling for the psalm or poetic prayer that follows, beginning with the words "Blessed be Your glorious name" and then continuing to the end of the chapter. This address to God reviewing His consistent intervention in Israel's history is sometimes referred to as the Levites' Psalm. Yet some refer to it as the Prayer of Ezra—seeing it as his response, perhaps already planned and written out, to the Levites' call to praise. The former seems more likely—that is, that this was all part of what the Levites spoke or sang—since Ezra's name is not mentioned. However, if it were spoken or sung together by the Levites, it had to have been written out ahead of time—and Ezra could certainly have helped with that.

This eloquent psalm recites the faithfulness of God throughout Israel's existence despite the persistent unfaithfulness of Israel. The recounting of the history was probably fresh on the minds of the people to whom the Book of the Law had been read over a three-week period. This passage is a testimony not only to God's powerful intervention on behalf of His people, but also of His great mercy and loyalty toward those with whom He had established His covenants. The psalm begins with the glory of God's name and His greatness as the Creator (verses 5-6). It then goes through God's involvement with Israel throughout the nation's history (verses 7-31): the call of Abraham and the promise of Canaan (verses 7-8); the deliverance from Egypt (verses

9-11); the time in the wilderness, including the giving of the law at Mount Sinai and the revelation of the weekly Sabbath (verses 12-21); the conquest of Canaan (verses 22-25); the period of the judges (verses 26-28); and the succession of prophets during the period of the monarchies of Israel and Judah (verses 29-31). Next we see the nation's subjugation to foreign powers as the righteous judgment of God—the period in which the people still find themselves in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah (verses 32-37).

With the example of God's faithfulness so powerfully before them in this historical review, the people commit to emulating His faithfulness through the making of a sure covenant with Him and abiding by it (verse 38). We will read about the sealing of this covenant in the next chapter.

Covenant to Obey God and Support His House (Nehemiah 10)

It is apparently still the 24th day of the seventh month (see chapters 8-9). Nehemiah lists the signers of the covenant made on this day (see 9:38). "The way someone 'signed' a document in the ancient world was similar to the use of a wax seal in more recent times. A distinctive seal was pressed into soft clay. The pattern of the seal showed what authority issued that document" (Nelson Study Bible, note on 10:1).

Nehemiah was the first to sign. Verses 2-8 then list the priests who placed their seals on the covenant. "Some of these names appear in a later list as heads of priestly houses (12:11-20). Twenty-one priests who were heads of households signed the agreement in the name of the houses and families of their respective classes. Ezra's name does not appear, perhaps indicating that he was not the head of a household" (note on 10:2-8). It could also be that Ezra wrote the document, serving not as a representative of the people in this covenant but as a mediator between the people and God—perhaps alongside the high priest Eliashib, whose name does not appear here either.

Seventeen Levites, some of whom later appear as heads of Levitical orders (see 12:8), also signed (10:9-13)—as did 44 civil leaders (verses 14-27). As for the rest of the people, though they did not themselves sign, they did agree to the terms of the covenant, which called for a curse on them if they failed to keep their oath of obedience to the Law that God gave through Moses (verses 28-29).

Special mention is given in the covenant to not intermarrying with people from the neighboring nations (verse 30). It could be that this problem was given consideration because of what happened prior to Ezra's governorship (see Ezra 9-10). However, it could also refer to the resurfacing of the problem as later discovered by Nehemiah (Nehemiah 13:23-30). As was mentioned in the Bible Reading Program comments on our previous reading, the reference to the people having separated themselves from the peoples of the lands in 10:28 (and 9:2) have led some to conclude that the events of chapters 8-10 occurred much later in Nehemiah's administration than where they fit in arrangement order (compare 13:3). Yet it could be that this covenant came early in Nehemiah's administration and the problems arose later in spite of it.

The biblical record demonstrates time and again that knowing what God wanted them to do was no guarantee that the people would do so.

Another concern addressed in the covenant is the buying of wares and grain—that is, doing one’s shopping for the coming days—on the Sabbath (10:31). Here again is a very specific problem that Nehemiah later dealt with as governor (see 13:15-22). Perhaps this was an issue addressed early on in Nehemiah’s administration that defiantly returned at a later time. The Sabbath command is appropriately known as the “test commandment” (compare Exodus 16, especially verse 4) because it presents a strong challenge for people to set aside their normal everyday wants and business in order to worship God. On the other hand, if the chapter arrangement of Nehemiah is not chronological, it could be that the problem occurred late and that this covenant followed it. Since the two problems of intermarriage and Sabbath breaking occur in both contexts, the latter seems a distinct possibility. As *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* notes on Nehemiah 10:31: “The provisions of vv. 31-34 may have been a code drawn up by Nehemiah to correct the abuses listed in chapter 13 (e.g., vv. 15-22).”

The people also agreed in the covenant to observe the Sabbatical year—that is, in every seventh year they would leave their fields uncultivated (to allow the nutrients in the soil to build up, thereby preventing the depletion of the land) and cancel debts owed them (10:31; see Exodus 23:10-11; Leviticus 25:1-7; Deuteronomy 15:1-6).

They further agreed to pay a temple tax of a third of a shekel for the ongoing expense of temple worship services—similar to the half shekel paid by the Israelites in Moses’ day for the tabernacle (see Exodus 30:11-16). *Expositor’s* lists a few possible explanations as to “why the offering should be a third rather than a half shekel. (1) Some maintain that the half-shekel of Exodus (30:16; 38:25-28) was meant as a onetime offering for the construction of the tabernacle and therefore has no bearing on the offering in Nehemiah 10:32. (2) Others argue that the offering was reduced from one-half to one-third because of economic impoverishment. (3) Some argue that the later shekel was based on a heavier standard, thus one-third of the later shekel was equal to one-half of the earlier shekel. That is, the later Babylonian-Persian shekel was twenty-one grams, whereas the former Phoenician shekel was fourteen grams, hence one-third the former was equal to one-half the latter” (note on verse 32).

Verse 34 says that lots were cast to determine who would provide the “wood offering” and in what order. Though no such offering was directly mentioned in the law, it is clear that the perpetually burning altar fire would have required an ongoing supply of wood (compare Leviticus 6:12-13). “Josephus mentions ‘the festival of wood-offering’ on the fourteenth day of the fifth month (Ab), when all the people were accustomed to bring wood for the altar (*War[s] of the Jews*, Book 2, chap. 17, sec. 6]...). The Mishnah (*Taanith* 4.5) lists nine times when certain families brought wood” (note on Nehemiah 10:34).

The covenant further confirms that the people would be faithful in the offering of the firstfruits and firstborn and in the payment of tithes (verses 35-38). The focus of these commitments is

brought out well in the last words of the document: “We will not neglect the house of our God” (verse 39). Like Sabbath breaking and intermarriage, failure to provide for the temple and priesthood through tithes and offerings was yet another matter specifically addressed by Nehemiah in chapter 13 (verses 10-14)—lending further support to the possibility that the covenant of chapter 10 was made after the events of chapter 13.

As the “house of our God” today is His Church, we should see in all this a parallel for us. We must all be committed to separating ourselves from the world, obeying God in all areas of our lives and providing for the needs of the Church and the work He has given it to do.

2 Corinthians 8

The apostle reminds them of charitable contributions for the poor saints. (1-6) Enforces this by their gifts, and by the love and grace of Messiah. (7-9) By the willingness they had shown to this good work. (10-15) He recommends Titus to them. (16-24)

The grace of Elohim must be owned as the root and fountain of all the good in us, or done by us, at any time. It is great grace and favor from Elohim, if we are made useful to others, and forward to any good work. He commends the charity of the Macedonians. So far from needing that Paul should urge them, they prayed him to receive the gift. Whatever we use or lay out for Elohim, it is only giving him what is his own. All we give for charitable uses, will not be accepted of Elohim, nor turn to our advantage, unless we first give ourselves to the King. By ascribing all really good works to the grace of Elohim, we not only give the glory to him whose due it is, but also show men where their strength is. Abundant spiritual joy enlarges men’s hearts in the work and labour of love. How different this from the conduct of those who will not join in any good work, unless urged into it!

Faith is the root; and as without faith it is not possible to please Elohim, Hebrews 11:6, so those who abound in faith, will abound in other graces and good works also; and this will work and show itself by love. Great talkers are not always the best doers; but these Corinthians were diligent to do, as well as to know and talk well. To all these good things the apostle desires them to add this grace also, to abound in charity to the poor. The best arguments for the obedience found in believers, are drawn from the grace and love of Messiah.

Good purposes are like buds and blossoms, pleasant to behold, and give hopes of good fruit; but they are lost, and signify nothing without good deeds. Good beginnings are well; but we lose the benefit, unless there is perseverance. When men purpose that which is good, and endeavor, according to their ability, to perform also, Elohim will not reject them for what it is not in their power to do. But this scripture will not justify those who think good meanings are enough, or that good purposes, and the mere profession of a willing mind, are enough to save. Providence gives to some more of the good things of this world, and to some less, that those who have abundance might supply others who are in want. It is the will of Elohim, that by our mutual supplying one another, there should be some sort of equality; not such a levelling as would

destroy property, for in such a case there could be no exercise of charity. All should think themselves concerned to relieve those in want.

The apostle commends the brethren sent to collect their charity, that it might be known who they were, and how safely they might be trusted. It is the duty of all believers to act prudently; to hinder, as far as we can, all unjust suspicions. It is needful, in the first place, to act uprightly in the sight of Elohim, but things honest in the sight of men should also be attended to. A clear character, as well as a pure conscience, is requisite for usefulness. They brought glory to Yeshua as instruments, and had obtained honour from Messiah to be counted faithful, and employed in his service. The good opinion others have of us, should be an argument with us to do well.

2 Corinthians 9

The reason for sending Titus to collect their alms. (1-5) The Corinthians to be liberal and cheerful, The apostle thanks Elohim for his unspeakable gift. (6-15)

When we would have others do good, we must act toward them prudently and tenderly, and give them time. Believers should consider what is for the credit of their profession, and endeavor to adorn the doctrine of Yeshua their Salvation in all things. The duty of ministering to the saints is so plain, that there would seem no need to exhort believers to it; yet self-love contends so powerfully against the love of Yeshua that it is often necessary to stir up their minds by way of remembrance.

Money bestowed in charity, may to the carnal mind seem thrown away, but when given from proper principles, it is seed sown, from which a valuable increase may be expected. It should be given carefully. Works of charity, like other good works, should be done with thought and design. Due thought, as to our circumstances, and those we are about to relieve, will direct our gifts for charitable uses. Help should be given freely, be it more or less; not grudgingly, but cheerfully. While some scatter, and yet increase; others withhold more than is meet, and it tends to poverty. If we had more faith and love, we should waste less on ourselves, and sow more in hope of a plentiful increase. Can a man lose by doing that with which Elohim is pleased? He is able to make all grace abound towards us, and to abound in us; to give a large increase of spiritual and of temporal good things. He can make us to have enough in all things; and to be content with what we have. Elohim gives not only enough for ourselves, but that also wherewith we may supply the wants of others, and this should be as seed to be sown. We must show the reality of our subjection to the gospel, by works of charity. This will be for the credit of our profession, and to the praise and glory of Yehovah. Let us endeavor to copy the example of Messiah, being unwearied in doing good, and deeming it more blessed to give than to receive. Blessed be Elohim for the unspeakable gift of his grace, whereby he enables and inclines some of his people to bestow upon others, and others to be grateful for it; and blessed be his glorious name to all eternity, for Yeshua Messiah, that inestimable gift of his love, through whom this and every other good thing, pertaining to life and godliness, are freely given unto us, beyond all expression, measure, or bounds.