

God's People Turn to Scripture

The Post-Crisis Response in Nehemiah 8

Jonathan McGrath

For many Christians globally, the pandemic forced a prolonged period where God's people could not gather in the ways they had gathered before the pandemic. Governments made decisions that limited believers' opportunity to gather—even in small groups.¹ Many Baptists chose not to celebrate the Lord's Supper during this time. This created a sense of mourning as we longed for communal worship and gathered interactions with other believers. The sense of displacement many believers felt mimics the sense of displacement God's people felt at many points in biblical history.

Ezra-Nehemiah describes one such period.² God's people had lived in exile because of their lack of faithfulness to God's covenant. In Nehemiah

¹ In the author's context, church gatherings were restricted for just under two years. The government placed restrictions on most physical gatherings that restricted the ability even to meet in small groups. Although restrictions have differed from context to context, most believers have faced some period of restrictions on gathering.

² Although split in modern Bibles, Ezra and Nehemiah were one book in ancient sources. For a helpful, recent summary of the arguments in support of compositional unity, see Hannah K. Harrington, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*, NICOT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2022), 18-21. For a fairly recent argument against compositional unity, see Israel Loken, *Ezra & Nehemiah*, EEC (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2011).

8, God has preserved an example of the proper response to a post-crisis situation. Under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah, and with the assistance of the Levites, God's people turned to Scripture. This article will show that communities gathered around the reading of God's word are a proper response to our post-crisis context.

The Political and Theological Background

Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians in 587 BC. The Babylonians had laid siege to the city for two years following a series of invasions across Judah that had lasted more than a decade. These invasions, which began in 605 BC, had decimated Judean villages and already forced many Judeans into exile. The cities of Judah remained desolate until 539 BC when Cyrus II of Persia brought the Babylonian empire to an end. He subsequently enacted a series of policies that allowed exiles to return to their homelands and funded the reconstruction of their temples.³

The exile in Babylon displaced ancient Judeans from their communities and land, and established forms of worship. The lack of both a temple and Levitical ministry forced the exiles to reassess their covenantal unfaithfulness. Biblical passages such as Lamentations and Psalm 137 reveal that the Israelites mourned the loss of the Promised Land and their displacement from Jerusalem and its temple.

Faithful Israelites knew that their displacement resulted from disobedience to the Lord. Although Nebuchadnezzar was the agent who brought about the destruction of Jerusalem and the Judean forced migration to Babylon, Israelites still proclaimed that "the Lord has rejected his altar," (Lam 2:7 CSB) and "he has wrecked his temple as if it were merely a shack in a field"

³ For the details of Cyrus II's policies, see Kenneth A. Ristau, "The Achaemenid Persian Empire in the West and Persian-Period Yehud," in *Behind the Scenes of the Old Testament*, ed. Jonathan S. Greer, John W. Hilber, and John H. Walton (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 236-43.

(Lam 2:6, CSB). The Lord had proclaimed through Jeremiah that Nebuchadnezzar was his servant who would bring his judgment upon his people (Jer 27:6, CSB).

Faithful Israelites knew the covenantal blessings and curses of Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28. They knew that the Lord had promised to “reduce your cities to ruins and devastate your sanctuaries . . . [to] scatter you among the nations” (Lev 26:31-33) if they refused to keep his covenant. They knew that the Lord had promised that “if you are not careful to obey all the words of this law . . . the Lord will scatter you among all the peoples from one end of the earth to the other” (Deut 28:58, 64). The prophets had further reinforced the covenantal threat of exile, but the Israelites had refused to listen.

However, the Israelites also knew that if they repented of their sin and returned to the Lord, he would restore them in the Promised Land and renew his covenant with them:

“But when they confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their ancestors—their unfaithfulness that they practiced against me, and how they acted with hostility toward me . . . when their uncircumcised hearts are humbled and they make amends for their iniquity, then I will remember my covenant with Jacob. I will remember my covenant with Isaac and my covenant with Abraham, and I will remember the land” (Lev 26:40-42).

They had hope that one day, after they had repented, “even if your exiles are at the farthest horizon, he will gather you and bring you back from there. The Lord your God will bring you into the land your ancestors possessed . . . The Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the hearts of your descendants, so that you will love him with all your heart and all your soul so that you will live” (Deut 30:4-6).

The Lord used Cyrus to begin a partial fulfillment of these promises in 539 BC (Isa 45:1-6). Babylon fell, and the displaced peoples were allowed to

return to their homelands. But, the Israelites were slow to return. Haggai tells of their lack of obedience in rebuilding the temple. The temple complex only came to completion some twenty years after Cyrus had allowed the Israelites to return and given them provisions to rebuild their temple (Ezra 5–6). Whereas the returned Israelites celebrated the Passover with the temple’s completion, Ezra 7–10 implies that before Ezra the scribe arrived in Jerusalem some fifty years later, the people had continued to disobey God’s covenant. Nehemiah 1–7 further reveals that the Israelites had not repopulated Jerusalem, nor rebuilt the city walls. Jerusalem’s walls performed a theological function by evidencing the people’s eschatological hope in a restored and renewed Jerusalem (Isa 60, 62; Zech 14). Scholars have argued that “the building of the wall is an extension of building the temple.”⁴ The walls marked off Jerusalem as a holy city with the temple as its central point.

After the completion of the city’s walls—with the city restored, godly leadership in place, and a desire to repopulate Jerusalem—the Israelites were ready to begin their post-crisis existence in Jerusalem. The Israelites knew that God would restore them if they repented of their sin and the sins of their ancestors and committed themselves wholly to the Lord. Nehemiah 8 describes how Ezra and Nehemiah led the people to commit themselves to the Lord and his covenant in this post-crisis setting.

God’s People Turn to Scripture: The Setting

Nehemiah 7:73b declares that the people had settled in their towns and the seventh month had come. The seventh month included the Festival of Trumpets on the first day, the Day of Atonement on the tenth day, and the Festival of Shelters in the latter half of the month. Later Judaism would refer to the first ten days of the month as High Holy Days due to their importance

⁴ Tamara Eskenazi, *In an Age of Prose: A Literary Approach to Ezra-Nehemiah* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1988), 83.

and theological significance.⁵ The people asked Ezra to bring out the scroll of the law of Moses (Neh 8:1).

The scroll of the law of Moses represented God's covenant with Israel. After Joshua had led God's people into the Promised Land, he challenged them to keep God's covenant. In Joshua 23:6-8, he charged the Israelites to "be very strong and continue obeying all that is written in the book of the law of Moses, so that you do not turn from it to the right or left and so that you do not associate with these nations remaining among you. Do not call on the names of their gods or make an oath to them; do not serve them or bow in worship to them. Instead, be loyal to the LORD your God, as you have been to this day." In Josiah's day, the high priest Hilkiah had rediscovered the book of the law in the Lord's temple. In response, the people renewed their covenant commitment to the Lord (2 Kgs 22:8; 23:1-3). Now that the people had rebuilt the temple and its city, they desired to bring out the book of the law to renew their covenant once again with the Lord.

The text evidences a desire from God's people to hear Ezra recite God's law to them. Most ancient Israelites would not have had access to God's law nor been able to read it if given access.⁶ They needed a competent leader to read it to them, and Ezra fulfilled this role (Ezra 7:10). The text also evidences that everyone capable of understanding gathered to hear Ezra read God's law (Neh 8:2-3). The crowd included both men and women, as well as any children capable of understanding the law of Moses. Whereas God's people knew they needed a competent leader to read the law, they did not restrict its hearing to only a select few. All able listeners gathered. The people's motivation seems organic. The people gathered. The people asked Ezra to bring out God's law. The people listened intently. No extrinsic motivation seemed necessary, as the people themselves desired to gather and listen to God's word.

⁵ Harrington, 359.

⁶ Although studies differ, the consensus is that only elite scribes and priests would have had the ability to read more than simple records.

God's People Turn to Scripture: The Method

A wooden platform had been made for Ezra to stand above the people (Neh 8:4). The text does not state the exact purpose of the platform. Although standing on the platform certainly would have helped Ezra project his voice, the text only notes that it allowed everyone to see him reading from the book of the law (Neh 8:5).

Ezra, with the probable assistance of the other priests on the platform (Neh 8:8), read for approximately six hours. Whereas this would not allow him to read through the entire Pentateuch, we should not assume that this implies he had an abbreviated form.⁷ Instead, verse 3 implies that he “read out of it” the portions that he chose.

Not only did Ezra read God's word to God's people, but others also helped them to understand it. Levites translated and explained the meaning of the passages to the congregation (Neh 8:7-8). Teaching God's law was one of the primary three functions given to Levites (Lev 10:11). Many among the congregation would have been born in Babylon and returned with Ezra (Ezra 8:2-20). They may have become accustomed to speaking and hearing Aramaic instead of Hebrew, and thus needed help with the translation. Others, through intermarriage with the people of the nations around Judah, raised children who couldn't speak Hebrew (Neh 13:24). More importantly, as Ezra-Nehemiah implies, God's people had not lived according to God's covenant, so many would have been unfamiliar with the teachings of the scroll of the law. The Levites ensured that those who had forgotten God's commands during their crisis learned God's law and understood it.

God's People Turn to Scripture: The Responses

As Ezra opened the scroll of the law of Moses, the people stood to honor it and immediately fell to the ground in worship (Neh 8:5-6). Ezra blessed

⁷ Harrington, 362.

the Lord, and the people raised their hands to declare their commitment. Raising hands could be signs of worship (Ps 28:2; Ezra 9:5) or covenant fidelity (Gen 14:22; Deut 32:40; Ps 106:26). Although the people immediately responded with typical acts of worship, the combination of uplifted hands and the declaration “amen” (Deut 27:15-26) suggests that this was an act of commitment to God’s covenant. The people bowed and worshiped with their faces to the ground. This humble action signifies worship throughout the Old Testament (Gen 24:26, 28; 43:28; Exod 4:31; 12:27, et al.). A mass group of people bowed with their heads to the ground out of respect for God’s word would have made a significant impression on all who attended.⁸

These combined actions show a reverence for God’s word and resolute commitment to obey it. The reason for their reverence does not arise from the words alone, but from the people’s knowledge of the God who gave these words to Israel (Neh 8:1).

As the words were read, they provoked an emotional response. The people wept and mourned (Neh 8:9). Why did the people weep and mourn? These were “actions that accompanied loss or any kind of national or individual disaster in ancient Israel.”⁹ The people had suffered a crisis because of theological compromise and disobedience to God’s law. Upon hearing God’s word, they responded with an action typically associated with mourning. Such weeping and mourning often accompanied acts of repentance—fasting, sitting in sackcloth, and tearing one’s clothes. One can imagine Ezra reading Leviticus 26 or Deuteronomy 28 and the people weeping and mourning at the memory of God’s curses, which had fallen on their parents, grandparents, and great grandparents. The reading of God’s word would have reminded them that these curses came in response to their covenantal disobedience.

⁸ Donna and Thomas Petter, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2021), 375-76.

⁹ Johanna W. H. Van Wijk-Bos, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 74.

Ezra responded to their mourning by discouraging it. The day had been sanctified as holy, which was not a reason to mourn but to rejoice (Neh 8:9-10). They should celebrate with food and drink and provide for those who don't have the means to celebrate. They should not rejoice because of their situation, but because of their God. Ezra reminded them of God's character and specifically that that the joy of the Lord is their strength (Neh 8:10). The people responded. They ate, drank, provided for the poor, and celebrated (Neh 8:12). However, the text notes that they did so not out of compulsion from their leaders, but "because they had understood the words that were explained to them" (Neh 8:12). Their response of celebration originated from their comprehension of God's word read and explained to them. God's word motivated their obedience.

Nehemiah 8:13-18 shows that on following days, Ezra continued to read God's law to God's people (Neh 8:18) and that the people found new ways to obey it. Upon reading the law, they discovered that the Feast of Shelters came in the seventh month (Neh 8:14), so they obeyed it in accordance with the prescriptions found in God's law (Neh 8:13-14, 18). The people repeatedly responded to the reading of God's word with willing obedience.

Nehemiah 9 shows that the reading of God's law also prompted a day of communal repentance. The people confessed their sins communally and confessed the sins of their ancestors (Neh 9:2). They once again read from the book of the law of God and worshipped as before (Neh 9:3). The prayer of repentance exalted God's majestic nature (Neh 9:5-6) and confessed his covenantal commitment to their ancestors (Neh 9:7-15). The people then confessed the sins of their ancestors (Neh 9:16-30) but also acknowledged God's faithfulness to his promises despite their sin (Neh 9:31). Their prayer pled for the Lord's deliverance, because they still considered themselves slaves in the Promised Land (Neh 9:36-37). They responded to God's word and their confession with a sworn oath to keep specific aspects of God's covenant (Neh 9:38-10:39). Nehemiah 8:14-10:39 shows repeated confession of sin in response to God's law and a renewed desire to obey it.

An Uncircumcised Heart: The Failure of Old Covenant Commitment

After seeing such a positive response to the gathered reading of God's law, the reader of Ezra-Nehemiah might expect the fulfillment of God's covenantal promises according to the blessings in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 30. However, both of those passages highlight that Israel's problem arises not from a lack of commitment, but from an uncircumcised heart. Leviticus 26:41 states that the Israelites must first humble their uncircumcised hearts to renew the covenant. Deuteronomy 30:6 says that only after they had repented completely (Deut 30:2) would the Lord circumcise their hearts to enable complete obedience.

Nehemiah 13 shows that the covenant commitments of Nehemiah 8–10 did not arise from a circumcised heart. Despite their vows in Nehemiah 10 and 12:44–13:3, the final chapter of the book systematically shows how God's people failed to keep their commitments during Nehemiah's return to Persia. Their initial post-crisis repentance and zeal after the rebuilding of Jerusalem and reading of God's law did not remain. Their hearts remained uncircumcised. So, the book ends with a personal plea that God remember Nehemiah, because he alone has remained faithful.¹⁰ The problem remained that an uncircumcised heart could not keep God's covenant.

God's People Should Turn to Scripture with Circumcised Hearts

In Romans 2:25-29, the apostle Paul contends that complete obedience to God's law requires circumcision of the heart and is not a matter of circum-

¹⁰ Readers interested in Ezra-Nehemiah's shocking ending, should see Gary E. Schnittjer, "The Bad Ending of Ezra-Nehemiah" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 173 (Jan-Mar 2016): 32-56. Also see Ched Spellman, "Nehemiah's New Shadow: Reading and Re-Reading the Ezra-Nehemiah Narrative" *Southeastern Theological Review* 9.1 (Spring 2018): 3-22.

cised flesh.¹¹ True righteousness comes only through faith in Jesus Christ (Rom 3:22). Because of Jesus's completed work on behalf of his covenantal people, those in Christ are brought into a new covenant—promised by the Old Testament prophets and brought to reality in Jesus Christ (Luke 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25; 2 Cor 3:6). The old covenant was made obsolete (Heb 8:13).

The transgressions of the old covenant that had kept God's people in slavery during Nehemiah's time (Neh 9:36-37) were redeemed through Jesus's death (Heb 9:15). Because of what Jesus has done, Christians are enabled to live obedient lives empowered by God's indwelling Spirit (Eph 2:1-10; 1 Peter 1:15-16)—loving him with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength (Deut 30:6; Matt 22:37).

The principles of Nehemiah 8 give an excellent example of how God's people should respond to a time of crisis, even though God's people were not able to live out their commitments at that time due to their uncircumcised hearts. But Christians, whose hearts have been circumcised through the completed work of Christ, are now able to apply the principles of Nehemiah 8 in our churches by the power of the Spirit.

As God's people in Nehemiah gathered to listen to God's word, so **God's people today should gather to listen to God's word**. In our current post-pandemic situation, God's people need renewal through hearing and committing once again to God's word. As God's people in Nehemiah 8 recognized the need for competent leaders to teach, translate, and interpret God's law, so God's people today need to gather under competent leaders who can faithfully teach and interpret God's word to them. The New Testament makes clear that God has provided the churches with teachers, especially those set apart as elders who are distinguished in their ability to teach (1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:9). As God's people submitted to the teaching and interpretation of Ezra and the Levites, so Christians should submit to their elders who are equipped to teach them from God's word (Heb 13:7, 17).

¹¹ Paul, as an Old Testament scholar, agrees with Lev 26:41 and Deut 30:6.

It should be noted that in Nehemiah 8, Levites needed to give the sense of the text, because the people no longer knew God's law. As they studied the law, they discovered forgotten ways to be obedient—such as the Festival of Shelters. In our current post-pandemic context, many have returned to our churches after two years of minimal commitment to the Lord. Some have forgotten the truths of the gospel; others have forgotten how to live as Christians. **Our gathered churches need competent leaders to explain faithfully the meaning of God's word and show from God's word how believers can apply these truths.** Some, upon hearing God's word, will realize how far they have strayed from the Lord during the pandemic. Like Ezra did, in response to their confession and mourning, competent leaders can point mournful brothers and sisters to the joy of the Lord and the gospel promises of forgiveness and restoration in Christ.

As God's people honored and revered the reading of God's word in Nehemiah 8, so **Christians today must remember that in our post-pandemic world of abundant false narratives, God's word stands above the rest.** We should honor it, uphold it, revere it, and humbly worship the God to whom it points. We should treat it as “inspired by God and . . . profitable for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:16-17).

Conclusion

In our post-pandemic context, many continue to struggle with feelings of displacement. They have felt disconnected from their friends, families, and in many situations, from God himself. The Nehemiah 8 solution for a post-crisis situation focuses on gathering believers around the communal reading and teaching of God's word. For those of us tasked to serve as missionaries, our task becomes clear. Many of us live in contexts where people remain cautious to gather due to pandemic fears. Others live in contexts where church members have become accustomed to streaming services and mediated methods. In these contexts, we should encourage God's people to gather

and not fear. We should encourage the reading and teaching of God's word under competent leaders. We should encourage God's people to respond to God's word with reverence and obedience. We should encourage gathered churches to have methods of not only teaching, but translating, interpreting, and applying God's word. We should encourage confession of sin and point people to the joy of the Lord.

Before and immediately after the exile, God's people had not fulfilled God's mission. God called them to represent him in the eyes of the nations as a priestly kingdom (Ex 19:6). Through the witness of Israel's faithfulness to the Lord, the nations would stream to Jerusalem (Deut 4:6-8; Zech 8:20-22). Today, the gathered church give witness to the Lord (Matt 5:14). The church functions as an embassy of God's priestly kingdom (1 Pet 2:9). Today, as in Nehemiah's day, when God's people gather around God's word, they hear faithful teachers proclaim God's mission and his plan to accomplish it. They remember the biblical stories of God's faithfulness. They encourage each other to persevere and find the joy necessary to endure. In our post-pandemic context, we should encourage God's people to turn to Scripture.

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