

Commentary for Lesson 8

July 26, 2020

Forgiving, Merciful, Compassionate

Focal Passage: Nehemiah 9:9-17, 32-33

Background Text: Nehemiah 9:1-38

Note: For those readers who use supplementary commentaries to prepare for each week's lesson, we will post downloadable commentary on AdultBibleStudies.com through the summer quarter. We will publish an annual commentary for purchase for Fall 2020–Summer 2021.

A Day of Repentance (Nehemiah 9:1-37)

Because of the abrupt change of mood between Chapter 8 (rejoicing) and Chapter 9 (penitence), many believe this chapter is out of place. Some would place it after Ezra 10, since that chapter deals with foreign wives, and this chapter repents for that sin. Others would leave this chapter in the Book of Nehemiah but put it after Chapter 13, since that chapter, too, deals with the sin of marrying foreign women. Wherever the chapter was originally, the probabilities are that the Chronicler moved it to its present position to show that the people who populated Jerusalem repented of their sins before doing so.

Confession and Praise (Nehemiah 9:1-5)

Fasting, sackcloth, and earth upon their heads were all signs of anguish, remorse, and mourning. According to verse 2, the people confessed not only their sins, but they confessed the iniquities of their fathers as well. They read from the book of the Law for a fourth of the day (verse 3). But who were "they"? Grammatically, "they" would refer to "the Israelites" of verse 2. Probably, however, the Levites of verse 4 are meant. The second "they" in the verse, however, does refer to all the people.

Verse 4 is the only place the "stairs of the Levites" (NRSV) or "on the stairs where the Levites stood" (NIV) are mentioned. We cannot be certain what these stairs were. Probably, they led to the platform from which Ezra had spoken earlier (8:4). Eight Levites are named.

Eight Levites are named again in verse 5. They are called "the Levites," as if they were the official group of Levites for the occasion, but only five of them are the same as those named in verse 4.

The call to bless the Lord "from everlasting to everlasting" is strange on two counts. First, one cannot be commanded to do something in the past. Second, only God exists from everlasting to everlasting. There

are two possible solutions. One is to say that the meaning is simply, “Bless the LORD” for evermore (compare Psalm 115:18). More likely, however, is the second solution. Notice that the second half of the verse is addressed to God: “Blessed be your glorious name.” Perhaps that prayer begins with the word “from.” The people were told to stand and bless the Lord; then begins the Levites’ prayer: “From everlasting to everlasting blessed be thy glorious name.”

Ezra’s Prayer (Nehemiah 9:6-37)

The rest of Chapter 9 is a long prayer, attributed to Ezra (9:6). The words “and Ezra said,” however, do not appear in the Hebrew text. The NRSV has taken these words from the Septuagint (Greek) version of the Hebrew Bible. Many commentators believe that originally this prayer had nothing to do with the story of Ezra or Nehemiah. It was a typical Jewish prayer of that day (compare, for example, Psalms 78, 105, 106, 135, 136). The Chronicler placed it here (if the interpretation given above is correct) as the continuation of the Levites’ prayer begun in verse 5.

The prayer emphasizes the greatness and the grace of God in dealing with the Israelite people. Throughout their history, the people had been unfaithful to God, but God had dealt with them in kindness (9:16-17). To be sure, God had to punish the people as a way of bringing them to repentance (9:26-27). But God’s punishment was always for the purpose of redeeming the people, never for the purpose of reprisal.

The ending of the prayer is confusing unless we are willing to admit that it comes from a time later than Nehemiah or Ezra. We are slaves this day, says verse 36. The rich yield of the land goes to the kings whom you have placed over us because of our sins . . . “and we are in great distress” (verse 37). That is contrary to the situation faced by Nehemiah or Ezra. They were not slaves; on the contrary, they had just returned from exile. Nor did they feel malice toward the Persian kings. Rather, they believed the kings had acted in accordance with the will and purpose of God (Ezra 1:1-5; 4:3; 6:1-15; 7:6; 11:28).

The situation described sounds much more like the fate the Jews suffered under later Greek rule (333–168 BC) than under the Persian kings. The Chronicler put this prayer here because it suited his purposes to do so. The people who will occupy the land in Chapter 11 must first repent of their sins (Chapter 9) and covenant to keep God’s law (Chapter 10).

Conclusion

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The prayer attributed to Ezra (Nehemiah 9:6-37) points out God's grace in dealing with the people. Although grace is primarily a New Testament word, the concept is as old as the first sinners who knew themselves forgiven of their sins. We, like the children of Israel, often refuse to obey. But God is ready to forgive, is slow to anger, and is abounding in steadfast love (9: 16, 26). Of course, God will punish, if we continue to disobey, but the purpose of the divine punishment is always to bring us to repentance (9:29-30).

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