

# The Bible

## unwrapped

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BRF BIBLE SUNDAY

## Sermon - background commentary

Extract from: *Chronicles to Nehemiah* – Michael Tunncliffe - *The People's Bible Commentary*

### Nehemiah 8:1-12

#### Water Gate

For the time being, we leave the memoirs of Nehemiah, though we shall return to them at the end of the book. For the next few chapters, Nehemiah virtually disappears from the scene, while Ezra once more steps into the spotlight. Ezra and Nehemiah are presented here as contemporaries. Ezra the priest is up on the platform and Nehemiah the governor is down in the crowd before the Water Gate. This is fitting, since a reading of the Law was a matter for a priest and scribe, not for a layman, not even a governor. The correct interpretation of this chapter lies at the heart of the whole chronological debate about these books. If the information in the chapter is correct, then Ezra and Nehemiah worked together as contemporaries. Yet there is a real problem with this interpretation. Why do their respective memoirs never so much as mention the other? Why isn't Ezra supporting Nehemiah in his struggles, or helping to build the wall along with the other priests? If Ezra arrived in 458, what has he been doing for the last thirteen years? Many modern commentators conclude that this chapter was originally part of the Ezra memoir and that it was moved to its present position by the final editor of the two documents. The reading of the Law would then be dated to the autumn of 458. This would place it during Ezra's first year in Jerusalem, rather than the present setting in the autumn of 445, which is Nehemiah's first year. If the books were finally edited a century or more later, then the editor may have assumed that the work of these two men overlapped in time as well as complementing each other. As a writer and editor, he may have felt that it made more sense for such a ceremony to take place only after the walls of Jerusalem were secure.

#### Reading and interpretation

The public gathering on the first day of Tishri, the seventh month, takes place in an open square (vv. 1-8). This was a space where all could attend, women and children as well as men. It is an important date in the calendar, the beginning of the Jewish New Year (called in Hebrew Rosh Hashanah). Ezra stands on a specially built platform, and thirteen of his supporters are with him. Meanwhile, down below, another thirteen Levites help to make sense of what is being read. Are they chanting it in unison, or are they moving about individually among the people? Furthermore, are they acting as 'interpreters' or as 'translators'? If the first, then they will be explaining the meaning of certain sections of the Law. If the second, they will be translating the Law from Hebrew into Aramaic. One way or another, Ezra ensures that the people not only hear but also understand the Law. By the fifth century, Aramaic had begun to replace Hebrew as a spoken language for the Jewish people. By the time of Jesus, it was the custom to have the reading of the scripture first in Hebrew, and then in the Aramaic language. The technical term for this Aramaic version was a Targum. At first they were oral and spontaneous, but eventually versions of the Law and of the Prophets were written down. These written Targums still survive and are an important witness alongside the other translations of the Old Testament into languages such as Greek, Latin, Syriac or the Coptic dialects of Egypt.

#### Weeping and rejoicing

Verse 9 briefly mentions Nehemiah standing in the crowd, but he plays no part in the ceremony. If the event originally took place in 458 rather than 445, then it must have been an unnamed governor who was present. If these ceremonies did take place in 445, then Nehemiah would certainly have given them his full support. The description of these events is rather similar to the occasion of Josiah's impressive Passover portrayed in 2 Chronicles 35. This time, however, it is autumn rather than springtime. According to Deuteronomy 31:10-13, the book of the Law should have been read at this time of year once every seven years. Deuteronomy also stresses the importance of children hearing it, and this is just what happens before the Water Gate. It is a new year, hence a new beginning and a time to put away sadness and regret. Furthermore, it is a time to share the joy with others who are too poor to provide portions of food for themselves. Ezra and Nehemiah, like Chronicles, are books that affirm parties and celebrations. The weeping of the people for past failures (v. 9) is transformed into joy.

For further information about *The People's Bible Commentary* visit [www.brf.org.uk/](http://www.brf.org.uk/)

