

## **EZRA-NEHEMIAH, part 16 Reformation Days, part 3 (Nehemiah 9)**

**by Dr. Ralph Davis**

### **III. The Preparation for Reformation – Nehemiah 9 [Prayer]**

It is probably too much to call this prayer a “condition” for reformation (that would go beyond the text), but surely it may be viewed as a *preparation* for reformation.

#### **A. Prelude to Prayer (Neh. 9:1-5)**

Let’s consider the prelude to prayer (Neh. 9:1-5) before looking at the prayer itself in more detail. Nehemiah 9:1 makes it clear that the people are now determined to get back to the business that had them so upset in Nehemiah 8:9. On this note:

##### **1. Their decision (Neh. 9:1)**

As Kidner points out (Neh. 9:1, the 24<sup>th</sup> day), the feast had finished on the 22<sup>nd</sup>; those who stayed on were doing so by deliberate choice.<sup>1</sup>

##### **2. Their obedience (Neh. 9:2)**

The text uses the term “seed” (*zara*) The reference to the “seed of Israel” implies the doctrine of the two humanities (in light of Gen. 3:15). Here Israel separates herself from amalgamating with the foreigners and from covenant compromise.

##### **3. Their procedure (Neh. 9:3)**

First came the reading of the torah, and then confession and worship. The worship was built upon the word. “In light of the previous chapter we may take it that the reading was no mere stream of words, but punctuated with explanatory comments and applications to the present situation.”<sup>2</sup>

##### **4. Their leaders (Neh. 9:4-5)**

The leaders on this occasion seem to be Levites. Those mentioned in verse 5 are not exactly the same as those mentioned in verse 4, but why should that be a big problem? I would take the words uttered in verse 5 as both a call to prayer and an introduction to prayer. The RSV inserts Ezra’s name as the one who prays this prayer (following LXX), but it is better to take it as coming from the Levites.

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<sup>1</sup> Kidner, TOTC, p. 110.

<sup>2</sup> Kidner, TOTC, p. 110.

The Levites begin with a call to worship: “Stand up and bless Yahweh your God from everlasting to everlasting!” (v. 5). Kidner nicely catches the irony: “The barely habitable city, the encircling heathen, and the poverty and seeming insignificance of the Jews are all transcended by the glorious reality of God.”<sup>3</sup>

## **B. Prayer (Neh. 9:6-38)**

Let us now consider the prayer itself:

Observe the historical moments it covers: creation (v. 6); Abraham (vv. 7-8); Exodus (vv. 9-12); Sinai (vv. 13-14); wilderness (vv. 15ff.); conquest (vv. 22-25); the judges and following (vv. 26ff.). We now trace the prayer in its development:

### **1. The gifts of your grace (Neh. 9:6-15)**

The majority of this section focuses on Yahweh as redeemer. However, verse 6 expresses homage to Yahweh as *creator*. Both verses 6 and 7 begin with the phrase *'attah hu'*, implying that the creator of verse 6 and the redeemer of verse 7 are one and the same. Verse 6 lauds Yahweh as not only creator of all things (heaven, earth, seas and their contents), but as life-giver and sustainer as well. What he makes he sustains; what he brings into being he preserves. This is an important principle to remember. And for all this he receives worship from those conscious, invisible beings called the “heavenly hosts.”

Verse 6 performs a valuable theological role in this prayer. Note that the Bible never allows you to bifurcate Yahweh as creator and redeemer. The Bible will not allow you to play creation over against redemption, or vice versa. If you ignore redemption, you lose the cross; if you ignore creation, you lose the world.

In the “redemption section,” the prayer highlights:

#### **a. Redemption and covenant (Neh. 9:7-8)**

- The root of covenant is election: “who chose Abram” (v. 7).
- The concern of covenant is place (“the Land,” v. 8b) and people (“his seed,” v. 8c).
- The anchor of covenant is fidelity (“so you made your words stand,” v. 8d).

#### **b. Redemption and judgment (Neh. 9:9-11)**

Though the note of compassion is not lacking (v. 9a), verses 10-11 stress the judgment aspect of Yahweh’s deliverance. The

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<sup>3</sup> Kidner, TOTC, p. 111.

protection of God's people at some point involves the destruction of their enemies. This is biblical eschatology in preview.

**c. Redemption and presence (Neh. 9:12)**

Yahweh does not grant redemption (vv. 9-11) while withholding direction (v. 12). If Yahweh gives greater gifts, he provides all other necessary gifts.

**d. Redemption and revelation (Neh. 9:13-14)**

Note how *positively* the Sinai gifts are described: upright ordinances, true laws, good statutes and commandments, holy Sabbath. In this passage and prayer view the Sinai revelation in the context of redemption, showing that law is a gift of grace for a redeemed people. These are *positive* benefits. Here one might say we have the pillar of cloud and of fire for daily living. Sinai is the assurance that Yahweh does not redeem a people from bondage only to abandon them to ambiguity. The law is the *clarity* of a gracious God who refuses to leave his people in limbo as to what his will is.

**e. Redemption and provision (Neh. 9:15)**

Episodes like those of Exodus 16-17 are in view here. This was not "normal" provision, but the provision in extremity (hunger, thirst), provided in unpredictable ways: "from heaven" and "from a rock."

"Look!" those who are praying say in verses 6-15, "Look at the massive grace of God!"

**2. The tenacity of your goodness (Neh. 9:16-31)**

**a. Rebellion — and patience and provision (Neh. 9:16-25)**

After the second-person perspective in verses 9-15, highlighting all that Yahweh ("you") has done, there comes a third-person comment: "But *they*, on their part" (v. 16). Verse 16 begins, "But they, our fathers, *acted arrogantly*" (NASB). The verb is the Hiphil of *zyd*, used also in verse 10, where it refers to the Egyptians acting arrogantly. So here (v. 16) Israel behaves as the Egyptians. There is an Egyptian nature within Israel. (The verb is also used in v. 29.)

Verses 16-17a use very strong language. This was no momentary lapse on Israel's part. Everything speaks of deliberate, open-eyed resistance to God's will. Whether the Hebrew of 17b means they actually appointed a leader to return

to Egypt (cf. Num. 14:4) or only were determined to follow such a plan, it is clear that they wanted to *reverse redemption*.

Rebellion is absurd (v. 16f.) in light of all the preceding acts of grace (vv. 7-15), and Yahweh is incredible: “But you are a God of forgivenesses” (v. 17b – note the plural!). Here is the phenomenal character of Yahweh. As if this were insufficient, we meet in the last line of verse 17 those amazing words, “And you did not forsake them” (see also v. 19; in v. 28 Yahweh does forsake them in handing them over to their enemies, and yet v. 31 reasserts the position of vv. 17,19).

This passage tells us where our hope must be: “But you are” (v. 17b). Our hope is not in denying or explaining away our rebellion, but simply in the *character of God*.

Verse 18 alludes to the “golden calf” episode of Exodus 32. In this they committed great “acts of contempt/disdain.” The word is *ne’atsah*, and appears also in verse 26. Nehemiah 9 passes over Moses’ intercession in Exodus 32-34 and goes on to how Yahweh treated these people who showed nothing but contempt for him: he “did not forsake” (v. 19). They received the same grace and guidance and provision as before (see vv. 12,15), as verse 21 testifies: “For forty years you sustained them.” The following verses celebrate the conquest/gift of the land east of the Jordan (vv. 22-23) and west of it (vv. 24-25); the whole reaches its climax in the bottom line of verse 25: they “reveled in your great goodness.”

What must be remembered, however, is that *all* this provision comes in the wake of their stubborn disobedience (vv. 16-17a,18). Remembering this context leads to an important observation: *God’s gifts are no sign of our righteousness*.

**b. Rebellion — and severity and kindness (Neh. 9:26-31)**

This section rehearses the behavior of Israel when settled in the Land, e.g., during the period of the judges. The prayer does not mention David or the Davidic covenant in this section. As in a previous generation (v. 18), Israel again commits great “acts of contempt” (v. 26). For this Yahweh brings them into distress (v. 27a), but the wonder is that there is distress *and* deliverance (v. 27b). But nothing changes. Israel is in a cycle of repeated infidelity (v. 28) — Yahweh abandons them, they cry out, Yahweh hears, etc. The tale can be told in the “many” phrases:

*Many times* You rescued them (v. 28)  
You bore with them for *many years* (v. 30)

In your *many compassions* You did not make an end of them (v. 31)

The use of *zyd* (“to act arrogantly”), in verse 29 harks back to its use in verse 16, and so much as says, “You see, nothing has changed throughout their history.” In one sense, Rudolf Bultmann is right: Israel’s history is a history of *miscarriage*. They are a people who perpetually fail in their basic covenant fidelity.

The previous sub-point (“Rebellion — and patience and provision”) carried the message, “You rebelled, yet God still provides.” This second sub-point says, “You rebelled, yet you still exist,” but that is due only to Yahweh’s compassions (vv. 27,28,31). It is as if the pray-ers are saying, “You have given us up, but you have not finished us off.” Looked at the *tenacity* of Yahweh’s goodness.

The prayer shows how true Yahweh’s revelation of himself is in Exodus 34:6-7. Yahweh himself seems to breathe through this prayer, as if to say, “Remember what I said in Exodus 34; that is what I am, and that is what I will be — no matter what you do.”

### **3. The rightness of your justice (Neh. 9:32-37)**

This section of the prayer begins with *we’atah* (“and now”). The Levites and the assembly are ceasing their historical review to make their contemporary request. In this section they ask God to hear and look upon:

#### **a. Our cry (Neh. 9:32)**

They ask the Lord not to look on all this history of troubles (lit. “hardship, weariness”) as a trivial item. They have been ravaged by the peoples of the lands, especially from the times when the kings of Assyria held dominance (722 B.C. and following, if not before) up to the present time.

#### **b. Our confession (Neh. 9:33-35)**

They confess, however, that Yahweh has acted rightly in all the distress that he has brought upon them. They clearly admit the rightness of Yahweh’s action and the persisting sin of Israel.

#### **c. Our condition (Neh. 9:36-37)**

Here is their condition at the current moment: “we are slaves” (stated twice); and “we are in great distress.” Even though they are back in the Land, they recognize that this is not a state of

blessing, for even though they are in the Land they are ruled over and taxed by others.

The prayer of chapter 9 ends *descriptively*, as if to say, “This is our situation.” There is no directive, no particular petition here. Rather they are simply saying, “Here is our condition.” That, however, is an implied petition in light of the whole prayer. They are asking, “Have your ‘great compassions’ altogether ceased? Have your mercies completely dried up? You will not now ‘forsake’ what you have refused to forsake so far, will You?”