The Ritual of Reading Scripture (Nehemiah 8:1–12)

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Nehemiah chapter 8 has attracted much attention in modern biblical scholarship, most of which has focused on the identity of “the book of the Torah” from which Ezra read to the people on the first day of the seventh month.¹ This question in turn has been related to literary-historical studies of the Pentateuch, and among others, to the questions of the origin and date of the Priestly Source, the canonization of the Hebrew Bible, and the like. An important aspect of these studies has been the discussion and interpretation of the second half of the chapter (vv. 13–18), which deals with the Festival of Succoth.² Much less attention has been paid to the first part of the chapter—the reading of the Torah (vv. 1–12); this is the focus of my present discussion.³


The lines of the story are simple, and without going into questions of narrative structure, unity of composition, and so on, they are as follows: The people of Judah gather in Jerusalem on the first day of the seventh month (Neh 7:72b; 8:2) and ask Ezra to bring “the book of the Torah of Moses” (8:1). Ezra obliges, and brings the book to the people. He takes his place on a wooden platform, and flanked by thirteen men, he reads from the book (vv. 3–4). The reading goes on from the early morning until noon (v. 3). As Ezra opens the book the people stand up, Ezra blesses God, the people respond by saying “Amen” with their hands lifted up, and they bow down in worship (vv. 5–6). Then thirteen Levites circulate among the people and explain to them what is being read (vv. 7–8). The people listen closely and start weeping; Ezra and the Levites react to this by instructing them to be happy rather than sad and to celebrate the day with food, drink and rejoicing (vv. 9–11). The people follow these instructions and leave the place to celebrate the occasion with “great joy” (v. 12).

Already this brief outline of the event attracts our attention by its peculiar character, expressed in both the details included and those expected but missing. The first thing to note is that, although the reading of the Torah is presented as a spontaneous act—Ezra’s response to the request of the people during their gathering in Jerusalem (vv. 1–2)—it is in fact a highly structured event, prepared in advance. At v. 4, we learn that in order to be seen and heard by the people, Ezra was standing on a wooden platform (NRSV),4 which had been prepared in advance for this purpose.5 The reading should thus be seen as a preconceived event rather than a spontaneous act.6

4 The Hebrew phrase is מגדל עץ literally, a wooden tower (NJPS; see also HALOT: “wooden framed tower,” 544). Since this meaning seems inadequate in this context, I preferred the rendering of BDB (“elevated stage, pulpit”; 154) and NRSV, inspired by the version/interpretation of the Septuagint: βῆμα. This interpretation is reflected also in the Mishnah, in the description of the king’s reading of the Torah at the end of the remission year: “a wooden platform” (בימה שליעם; m. Sotah, 7:8). The precise nature of this structure is not specified, but it was certainly quite big and solid, as it accommodated fourteen people (see the next verse). It is often compared to the “bronze platform” (כחן תועה), on which Solomon stood at the dedication of the Temple, but the nature of this structure is also unclear.

5 For the conclusion that this statement betrays the nonspontaneous character of the event see, among others, Williamson, Ezra, Nehemiah, 288; Michael Kochman and Michael Heltzer, The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah (Olam Hatanach 17; Jerusalem: Davidson/Tel-Aviv: Atai, 1988), 153 (in Hebrew).

6 This seems to be the narrative pattern of Ezra’s acts in Jerusalem, as is demonstrated by the account of his dealings in the matter of the mixed marriages. There too, the initiatives are