

SEEING DISCONTINUITY IN CHRONICLES-EZRA-NEHEMIAH THROUGH REFORMS

MANOJA KUMAR KORADA*

Abstract: *The question of whether the books of Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah are commonly or individually authored, has been alive in scholarly discussion for the last four decades. Taking the position for their individuality, this article argues that the individuality between them becomes clearer in their discontinuity, especially in the case of “reform.” While each of these books deals commonly with the issue of reform, there emerges differing attitudes to the involvement of the common people in the reform and the impact thereof. The point of divergence is how each book relates the common people to the reform. While the Chronicler’s interest primarily lies in individual authority (king), the author of Ezra is minimally sympathetic to the common people and their usefulness in the reform; but the author of Nehemiah heavily democratizes the process of reform and shows that the involvement of the common people and the outcome or impact of a reform are directly proportional.*

Key words: *Chronicles-Ezra-Nehemiah, authorship, reform, discontinuity, people, impact, common people, mass movement, mass impact*

Since the last four decades or so, the argument of discontinuity in Chronicles-Ezra-Nehemiah has emerged as a viable alternative¹ to the view of a single authorship.² While cases for discontinuity typically engage source-critical, redaction-critical, and linguistic approaches,³ the thematic-ideational perspective has not received adequate attention. This article seeks to address this lacuna by looking at the theme of reform, particularly the three important reforms in Chronicles-Ezra-Nehemiah (2 Chronicles 35–36; Ezra 9–10; Nehemiah 8–10). It argues that these

* Manoja Korada is an associate professor of OT at IPC Theological Seminary Kottayam, Kerala, India 686011. He can be contacted at manojkorada@gmail.com. This is an amplified and modified version of the paper presented at the Tyndale conference in Cambridge, UK in June 2017.

¹ For example, see Sara Japhet, “The Supposed Common Authorship of Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah Investigated Anew,” *VT* 18 (1968): 330–71; F. M. Cross, “A Reconstruction of the Judean Restoration,” *JBL* 94 (1975): 4–18; H. G. M. Williamson, *Israel in the Books of Chronicles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); Mark A. Throntveit, “Linguistic Analysis and the Question of Authorship in Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah,” *VT* 32 (1982): 201–16; P. R. Ackroyd, “Chronicles-Ezra-Nehemiah: The Concept of Unity,” *ZAW* 100 (1988): 189–201; Mark J. Boda and Paul L. Redditt, eds., *Unity and Disunity in Ezra and Nehemiah* (Hebrew Bible Monographs 17; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2008).

² Scholars still support the traditional view of unity or complementarity. For instance, Tamara C. Eskenazi thinks that one cannot ignore the structural unity of Ezra-Nehemiah. See Tamara C. Eskenazi, “The Structure of Ezra-Nehemiah and the Integrity of the Book,” *JBL* 107 (1988): 641–56; W. J. Dumbrell, “The Purpose of the Books of Chronicles,” *JETS* 27 (1984): 257–66.

³ One article that can be mentioned is that of Gary Knoppers which analyzes how Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah show different attitudes to mixed marriage. G. N. Knoppers, “Intermarriage, Social Complexity, and Ethnic Diversity in the Genealogy of Judah,” *JBL* 120 (2001): 15–30.

reforms underline an ideational discontinuity among these books in that each book or author displays a unique attitude towards the people's involvement in the reform; their interest in, and knowledge of, the *torah* (the word); and the impact of the reform. While the Chronicler underscores the individual's role in a reform and thus ignores the people's involvement, the author of Ezra reverses it with a caveat that a leader is indispensable to the process, and the author of Nehemiah highlights a mass reform or a mass movement which obviates the need for a leader. Furthermore, patterns determine impact: the Chronicler's pattern of individuality yields a low impact of reform on the people, while the patterns of people's reform in Ezra and Nehemiah yield a meaningful and mass impact, respectively. This shift from leader-oriented, partly people-led reforms to a total mass movement, with varying impacts or results, suggests an ideational discontinuity between the books of Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah.

I. THE CHRONICLER'S FOCUS ON INDIVIDUALITY AND A CONSEQUENT LOW IMPACT OF THE REFORM

The Chronicler's account in 2 Chronicles 34 focuses on Josiah's singlehanded reform, as he seems to be disinterested in the people. The Chronicler sets the tone of his positive attitude towards a one-man reform right at the beginning: notice the word play between *יאשיהו* and *ייעש* (Josiah doing the right thing); and between *מלך* and *ולך* (Josiah walking according to the law during his rule).⁴ However, in the process, the Chronicler's account also shows that the religiosity of one individual, the king, has very little impact upon the people if they are passive.

The Chronicler presents his focus on Josiah in three phases. The first phase (before Josiah returns to Jerusalem in v. 7) highlights Josiah undertaking the reform process singlehandedly, as the story is replete with third masculine singular verbs: *החל לדרוש* (v. 3); *החל לטהר* (v. 3); *גדע*, *שבר*, *והדק* (v. 4); *וטהר*, *שרף* (v. 5). There is a plural usage in v. 3 (*וינתצו*). But the question here is: Who are they, and how does the plural appear here without any trace of their identity or any preceding information in the narrative? Does the third person plural pronoun ("they") refer to royal activists appointed by Josiah? That it is a singlehanded task, perhaps supported by the royal machinery, is clear from the concluding verse which rehearses almost all the verbs which the text uses up to that point (*גדע*, *בפתת להדק*, *וינתצו*)—note the verbs, *וינתצו* and *וינתצו* in vv. 3 and 7.

The second phase of the reform highlights the involvement of different professional groups in renovating the temple: the royal bureaucracy, skilled workers (masons and carpenters etc.), the priestly guild, the supervisors, and the laborers (*הספדלים*, v. 13). Here the people are seen as financing the royal project through

⁴ Lyle M. Eslinger makes a similar point on the individual piety of Josiah by comparing the Chronicler's account with that of the Kings. He thinks that while the Deuteronomist's Josiah is imitating his father, the Chronicler's Josiah does the right thing independently since his early childhood. See Lyle M. Eslinger, "Josiah and the Torah Book: Comparison of 2 Kgs 22:1–23:28 and 2 Chr 34:1–35:19," *HAR* 10 (1986): 51–52.

their gifts to the temple treasury, but their participation is somewhat passive and distant. The time and circumstance under which the Levites (the door keepers) collect money from the people is unclear.

The third phase of the reform is set off by a serendipitous discovery of the book of the law. This compels Josiah to seek prophetic advice leading to the involvement of the people in the process of reform. But the involvement of the people is managed by the state. The verbs used here are all in hiphil form:

וַיֵּאסֹף (Josiah gathers the elders);

וַיַּעֲמֵד (Josiah makes the people to commit);

וַיַּעֲבֹד ... וַיַּעֲבֹד (Josiah makes the people to serve Yahweh).

In other words, the text is silent on the interest of the people in the process.

As noted earlier, the Chronicler's account shows the flipside of a single-handed reform, which is its low impact upon the people. (1) Even after the covenant and reform, the text reports the people serving Yahweh in negative terms (אָחֲרַי יְהוָה) כְּלִי-יָמִיו לֹא סָרוּ מֵאֲחֲרַי יְהוָה (v. 33). The negative terms become starker when seen against the young Josiah's commitment to Yahweh, stated in both positive and negative terms (וְלֹא-סָר ... בְּדַרְכֵי וַיֵּלֶךְ v. 2). Moreover, the text is silent on the process of internal transformation (attitude or emotion) of the people unlike the mentioning of Josiah's humility and the rending of his clothes. (2) Celebration of the Passover seems to be purely a state affair where the whole event happens at the expense of the state treasury. A parallel in the people's passivity must be noted here. Earlier the people had contributed financially to the repair of the temple and yet they remain distant and passive; now, the state pays for the celebration of the Passover, but the people needed to be coaxed or commanded to join in.⁵ It is true that the Chronicler anchors the celebration in the word,⁶ but its knowledge remains confined to the royal-priestly circle. (3) Josiah the reformer seems to misunderstand the purpose of reform and pays with his life. At the beginning, Josiah humbles himself when hears the law. Following this, he receives a prophetic word that his reform is not going to prevent Judah's exile from the land, although Yahweh offers him a peaceful end of life. But Josiah ignores this prophetic commentary (word) of the law and chooses to use the religious reformation as a launch pad to revive the political fortune of Judah (אֲחֲרַי כָּל-יְזֹאת אֲשֶׁר הִכִּין יְאֹשִׁיָּהוּ אֶת-הַבַּיִת עָלָהּ נָכוֹ) אֲחֲרַי כָּל-יְזֹאת אֲשֶׁר הִכִּין יְאֹשִׁיָּהוּ מִלְּדֹ-מִצְרַיִם לְהִלָּחֵם בְּכַרְבְּכֵמִישׁ עַל-פֶּרֶת וַיֵּצֵא לְקִרְאָתוֹ יְאֹשִׁיָּהוּ (2 Chr 35:20).⁷ Josiah fails

⁵ Christine Mitchell even goes so far as to argue that Josiah's Passover celebration was the sin that he committed because (1) the celebration of the Passover was Josiah's dictum that overrode the divine command to do it, although Josiah acknowledges it; (2) he was roping in Levitical participation, which was against Yahweh's will as they are not supposed to be inducted into priestly service at that time. Christine Mitchell, "The Ironic Death of Josiah in 2 Chronicles," *CBQ* 68 (2006): 29, 27–31.

⁶ Eslinger, "Josiah and the Torah," 58–59.

⁷ Comparing the two versions of Josiah's death, 2 Kings 23 and 2 Chronicles 35, Zipora Talshir says that the Chronicler's account suggests Josiah's direct political ambition. She thinks that Deuteronomist's Josiah is executed by the Egyptian overlord because the latter may have interpreted Josiah's widespread reform as a rebellion to his suzerainty; however, the Chronicler's Josiah makes his intention clear by

to see the warning of Pharaoh Neco—whether or not Pharaoh’s warning in the name of Yahweh is authentic—in light of the prophetic word. As a result, he wages an unwarranted war and dies an untimely death.

In sum, the Chronicler seems to be disinterested in the people’s involvement in the reform and, more importantly, according to his account, the word remains with the elite (king and priests); it is made accessible to the people on rare occasions such as the covenant renewal ceremony. The consequence of all this is a low impact of reform upon the people. The author does not reveal the internal process or any internal change that might have taken place among the people. However, departing from the Chronicler’s attitude, the author of Ezra highlights the role of the people in the reform and its meaningful impact. Furthermore, the author of Ezra underscores that such an impact is possible because there is an increasing movement of the word towards the common people.

II. THE PATTERN IN EZRA’S REFORM (INCREASING INVOLVEMENT OF THE PEOPLE AND A MEANINGFUL IMPACT)

The final form of the book of Ezra first records the return of exiles, the laying of the foundation of the temple and the dedication of the temple; then, it rehearses Ezra’s return from Babylon and describes his reform. Notably, Ezra’s reform is recorded at the end of the book (Ezra 9–10), underlining the move towards an increasing participation of the people. The author of Ezra shows that although the people actively lead the reform, they recognize the leader’s authority and thus refuse to usurp it.⁸

The account begins with an initiative of a group of nobles (הַשָּׂרִים, Ezra 9:1) bringing the issue of intermarriage to Ezra’s attention. Perhaps these nobles are to be seen as a representative of the common people (שָׂרֵי הָעָם, Ezek. 11:1). Here the post-exilic leaders/princes stand in opposition to the ones in the exilic period who represented the rebellious Israelites (Ezek 11:1). Furthermore, the complaint of the representatives becomes the people’s concern because the priests and officials are equally guilty of this accusation.

Ezra responds to the problem with pain and shame. He shows the right attitude to sin but does not display his spiritual authority to solve the problem.⁹ Ezra seems to be a mild-mannered and helpless leader; he needs support, which is ren-

enmeshing himself into a military conflict. See Zipora Talshir, “The Three Deaths of Josiah and the Strata of Biblical Historiography (2 Kings XXIII 29–30; 2 Chronicles XXXV 20–5; 1 Esdras I 23–31),” *VT* 46 (1996): 213–19.

⁸ Janice A. Curcio, in her unpublished doctoral dissertation, remarks that Ezra departed from the previous unsuccessful royal reforms. While the royal reforms destroyed cult objects that repeatedly made their ways back to Israelite religion, Ezra struck at its root by ridding the community of foreign wives who would have popularized and perpetuated foreign cults. See Janice A. Curcio, “Genesis 22 and the Socio-Religious Reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah” (Ph.D. diss., Brunel University, 2010), 171. Curcio’s remark is facile, because, as we shall show, were it not for the spread of the word among the masses, Ezra’s exercise would have failed.

⁹ Contra Jacob L. Wright, “Seeking, Finding and Writing in Ezra-Nehemiah,” in *Unity and Disunity in Ezra and Nehemiah*, 287.

dered by the people.¹⁰ Here the people are not mentioned with the use of a generic term but specified as those who fear the word of Israel's God (וְאֵלֵי יִאָסְפוּ לֹל הַדָּרַד, וְאֵלֵי יִאָסְפוּ לֹל הַדָּרַד, Ezra 9:4). One should note the gradual buildup from a select group of leaders (v. 1) to a slightly bigger group (v. 4) that is aware of what the law requires (from וְנִגְשׁוּ אֵלַי הַשְּׂרָיִם to וְאֵלֵי יִאָסְפוּ לֹל הַדָּרַד). While נִגְשׁוּ expects Ezra to settle the case as a leader, the verb יִאָסְפוּ lends support to the cause. Nevertheless, although the pious response of Ezra is necessary, it seems to paralyze him, leaving him unable to deal with the matter at hand. At this point, a crowd that is larger (וְנִקְבְּצוּ אֵלָיו מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל קָהָל רַב־מְאֹד, Ezra 10:1) than the group mentioned in verse 4 begins to rally behind Ezra—note the parallel and shift between וְאֵלֵי יִאָסְפוּ לֹל הַדָּרַד and וְנִקְבְּצוּ אֵלָיו קָהָל. The larger crowd not only identifies with Ezra emotionally but also confesses sin along with Ezra (בְּיָבֹכֹוּ הָעָם הַרְבֵּה־בְּיָבֹכָהּ, Ezra 10:1; וְאִנְחָנוּ מְעַלְנוּ בְּאֵלֹהֵינוּ, Ezra 10:2). Following this, the crowd moves to solving the issue at hand. Perhaps knowing that Ezra is somewhat diffident in dealing with the issue, they proceed in a way that will build his morale and confidence: they commit themselves to the task (וְעָתָה נִכְרַת־בְּרִית לֵאלֹהֵינוּ, Ezra 10:3); they include the previous group that has lent support earlier (וְהַחֲרָדִים בְּמַעֲוֹת אֱלֹהֵינוּ, Ezra 10:3); then they also lend their support and commission Ezra to show himself strong for the task (קוֹם בְּיַעֲלִיךָ הַדָּבָר וְאִנְחָנוּ עִמָּךְ, Ezra 10:4). In all of this, the crowd does not forget to assert the centrality of the word for this reform (וְכַתּוּרָה יַעֲשֶׂה, Ezra 10:3).

It is important to note that the people's movement and the word happen exponentially: initially, the word is found with Ezra who devotes himself to its study and observance; it moves to a group that trembles at the word; then it moves to the larger crowd which understands the centrality of the word. This is unlike the Chronicler's account of Josianic reform in which the word remains only with the royal-priestly class. Moreover, the author of Ezra acknowledges the people's role in galvanizing the leader. The text presents a pattern in this regard: The noble brings the problem and Ezra responds by sitting down; a larger group gathers around Ezra and Ezra responds by rising up, but he is still inactive; an even bigger crowd gathers and weeps and asks Ezra to rise up and take up the matter and Ezra responds by rising up to act. This pattern notwithstanding, the author of Ezra does not dispense with the role of a leader who presides over the reform. Hence, he portrays the people as being unwilling to usurp the role of a leader, although they play a critical role.

Not only does the author of Ezra show how the people play a critical role, he also shows the fruitful impact their involvement brings. A few points can be noted. First, Ezra leading the ceremony and making the people swear to follow the word (וַיִּשְׁבְּעוּ and וַיִּשְׁבְּעוּ, Ezra 10:5) is unlike what Josiah does to the people. Ezra's reform, unlike that of Josiah, is not unilateral because the people have provided the impetus to Ezra for doing so. Similarly, although the people gather at Jerusalem

¹⁰ Tamara Eskenazi has elaborately dealt with Ezra and Nehemiah as literary characters. She thinks that Ezra is not as self-effacing and imposing as Nehemiah; Ezra leads at an invitation and recedes to the background. See Tamara C. Eskenazi, *In an Age of Prose: A Literary Approach to Ezra-Nehemiah* (SBLMS 36; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 137–58.

within the stipulated time because of a coercion and threat (יִבְדֹּל מִקְהֵל, Ezra 10:8), they realize the gravity of the problem at hand (מִרְעִידִים עַל־הַדָּבָר, Ezra 10:9). Second, the people are willing to be accused and then to acknowledge their guilt (וַיֵּאמְרוּ קוֹל גָּדוֹל בֵּן [=בְּדַבְרֵיָדָד] [ק=בְּדַבְרֵיָדָד] עָלֵינוּ לַעֲשׂוֹת, Ezra 10:12). Third, the people entrust the matter to leaders for a thorough investigation and an impartial settlement of the issue. Hence, the settlement of cases begins with the erring priests, Levites, and singers, and ends with the commoners.

In sum, as opposed to the Chronicler's account, the reform of Ezra suggests that the author moves toward a people-guided reform in which he shows the people's involvement and their knowledge of the word, and how these things impact the masses. This notwithstanding, the author of Ezra does not support a full-scale mass movement because he still considers the individual leadership sacrosanct. However, the author of Nehemiah goes a step further and shows that the mass impact of a reform requires a mass movement of the common people that is anchored in the word. In such a reform movement, the leaders, especially the clergy, must collaborate with the commoners as an aiding agent, and not as an authoritative body.¹¹

III. THE PATTERN IN NEHEMIAH 8–10 (MASS MOVEMENT AND MASS IMPACT)

Before we consider Nehemiah 8–10, the obvious question that might arise is: If the author of Nehemiah was interested in a mass movement, why does he record the other reforms (Nehemiah 5, 13) that are led by an individual? Since the author records them, do these not negate the thesis argued in this article? I suggest that they do not. The author ends the book (Nehemiah 13) with Nehemiah's reform because it befits the dominant character of the book: both ends of the book mention Nehemiah's tasks. The reform in Nehemiah 5 is undertaken to attend to the crisis during the building of the wall. However, Nehemiah 8–10 plays an important role in the rebuilding of the community and the wall. This is placed after the census (Nehemiah 7) and before the dedication of the wall. That is to say, Nehemiah 8–10 binds together the post-exilic community as the community of faith and Jerusalem as the dwelling place of God. The author of Nehemiah goes on to present the reform in terms of a mass movement and mass impact.¹² For him, a close connection between the mass and the word is the key to a mass impact, because it is the mass

¹¹ Wright briefly mentions the place of Torah in realizing a distinct identity of the Judean community. However, there are differences between his argument and ours. Wright argues that the Torah-oriented reform in Nehemiah replaces the earlier Temple-centered community of Ezra, but we argue that the Torah-led reform in Nehemiah is of a different kind, and of a higher level, than that of Ezra. Wright also argues that the people-priest "diarchy" in Ezra is critiqued in Nehemiah, but we suggest that this relationship is not so much confrontational, especially in the reform, as collaborative (of course, the clergy plays second fiddle). See, Wright, "Seeking, Finding and Writing," 294–96.

¹² This argument is a derivative of Ezra-Nehemiah's ideology which Kyung-Jin Min describes as "decentralization of power; unity and co-operation between social classes; dissatisfaction with the current religious system." Kyung-Jin Min, *The Levitical Authorship of Ezra-Nehemiah* (JSOTSS 409; London: T&T Clark, 2004), 115.

which initiates, experiences, inspires, leads, and executes the reform; leaders and clergy become only aiding agents. This is a step further from what the author of Ezra shows.

1. *The initiating mass.* While the opening verses in Nehemiah 8 appear quite simple, their literary-theological analysis suggests the importance of the people's initiative for a reformation.¹³ This can be understood when one compares the act and manner of the people's gathering (אָהַד כְּאִישׁ אֶחָד, v. 1) with other gatherings mentioned in the book of Nehemiah. In the earlier part, the book says that the people, especially the nobles and priests, mobilize themselves for a good cause (וַיִּמְרוּ נְקוּם וּבְנִינוּ וַיְחַזְקוּ יְדֵיהֶם לְטוֹבָה, Neh 2:18), which is brought about by a leader. For instance, on the earlier occasions, Nehemiah, the leader, initiates and directs the entire process and the people respond to Nehemiah's inspiring talk for rebuilding the wall.¹⁴ The people only identify problems such as the dearth of human resource and the enormity of the task, but it is Nehemiah who initiates solutions and executes them.¹⁵ Even the previous chapter (Nehemiah 7) speaks of Nehemiah himself gathering the people for their registration (וַיִּתֵּן אֱלֹהֵי אֱלֹלֵבִי וְאֶקְבְּצָהּ, Neh 7:5). Of course, 5:16 mentions an occasion where the people gather themselves for work, but they are identified as Nehemiah's men/servants, and not as the people (וְכָל־עַמִּי קְבוּצִים שָׁם עַל־הַמְּלָאכָה). But, now, in Nehemiah 8, the people mobilize themselves as the reflexive action (וַיִּאָּסְפוּ, niph'al 3cs) underlines their initiative sufficiently. Perhaps the use of an uncommon verb for gathering—אָסַפּ instead of קָבַץ that is frequently used in the book—also strengthens this. The book begins with Yahweh gathering the people Israel (קָבַץ, Neh 1:9); it proceeds to Nehemiah gathering the people for the census (קָבַץ, Neh 7:5), but the reform happens when the people take initiative to gather (אָסַפּ, Neh 8:1). One may say that the census preceding such a gathering echoes a pattern of God's sovereign work or presence (e.g. David's census leading to building of the temple). Even if this is conceded, the people's initiative still remains critical in realizing the divine work. The varying intensity of the same usage in Ezra 3:1 and Neh 8:1 is instructive in this regard. While the former uses וַיִּאָּסְפוּ הָעָם, the latter adds כָּל to it. More importantly, concurring with Wright's idea, we would suggest that the verb וַיִּאָּסְפוּ in Ezra 3:1 occurs against the background of Cyrus's bidding the Judean community to rebuild the temple and organize their cult.¹⁶ Hence, unlike Neh 8:1, the reflexive import in וַיִּאָּסְפוּ in Ezra 3:1 loses its force.

Not only the gathering and its intention, but the oneness in the people's purpose also suggests the initiative. That is, "the many" morph into "one person," or the mass transforms into one indivisible entity. This is evident in the parallel in the

¹³ While H. G. M. Williamson thinks that the initiative may not be "spontaneous," Tamara Eskenazi says that the gathering is purely self-propelled. See H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah* (WBC 16; Waco, TX: Word, 1985), 287; Eskenazi, *In an Age of Prose*, 97.

¹⁴ וְאֶנְדִּי לָהֶם אֶת־יְדֵי אֱלֹהֵי אֲשֶׁר־הִיא טוֹבָה עָלַי (Neh 2:18).

¹⁵ וְהָעֶפְרַת הִרְבָּה וְאֲנַחְנוּ לֹא נוּכַל לְבָנוֹת בַּחוּמָה (Neh 4:4 [Eng. v. 10]); וְאֶעֱמִיד . . . וְאֶעֱמִיד אֶת־הָעָם; וְאָרָא וְאָקוּם וְאָמַר אֶל־הַחֲרִים; (Neh 4:8 [Eng. v. 14]).

¹⁶ Wright, "Seeking, Finding and Writing," 297.

second half of the phrase: **כָּל־אִישׁ=הָעָם**.¹⁷ The author further strengthens his point of the people-initiated movement by underlining motion and spatial significance, where people gathered (**אֶל־הַרְחֹב אֲשֶׁר לְפָנַי שַׁעַר־הַמַּיִם**) (Neh 8:1). The people came toward an open place, facing the water gate, not to the gate in itself. The motion signifies something different from a leader-initiated movement, because the book mentions Nehemiah's motion through and towards different gates **וְאָבֹא; וְאָעֲבֹר אֶל־שַׁעַר הָעֵין; וְאֶל־פְּנֵי עַיִן הַתְּנַיִן וְאֶל־שַׁעַר הָאֲשַׁפֹּת; וְאֶצְאָה בְּשַׁעַר־הַגֵּיא (בְּשַׁעַר הַמַּיִם)**.¹⁸ Also, the mentioning of the water gate (**שַׁעַר־הַמַּיִם**) underscores the same point. The book mentions several gates such as the valley gate, the dung gate, the fountain gate, the sheep gate, the fish gate, the horse gate, and the inspection gate; and all these gates have been rebuilt by the nobles and priests under the leadership of Nehemiah (Nehemiah 2–3). However, the water gate, where the people gather, goes unmentioned in the list of repairs. Perhaps this deliberate omission by the author is to negate Nehemiah's initiative and influence in the reform. Even if one assumes that the water gate is the same as the spring or the fountain gate, by renaming the location as the water gate the author highlights an exclusive mass movement through spatial symbolism.¹⁹

Having gathered, the people tell Ezra, the scribe, to bring the book of the law (**הַסֵּפֶר לְעֹזְרָא הַסֵּפֶר לְהִבִּיא אֶת־סֵפֶר תּוֹרַת מֹשֶׁה**) (Neh 8:1). In the book of Nehemiah, the verb **אָמַר** is mostly used by Nehemiah, the leader, and to a lesser extent by the people. While the former uses it in relation to him taking initiative and inspiring the people,²⁰ the latter use it in relation to giving information or consent. Insofar as the people are concerned, they inform Nehemiah about the pitiable condition of survivors in Jerusalem (**וַיֹּאמְרוּ לִי הַנְּשָׂאִים אֲשֶׁר־נִשְׂאָרוּ מִן־הַשְּׁבִי**) (Neh 1:3); they inform about the exhausted human capital for the task (**וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה כִּשְׁל פַּח הַסֶּבֶל**) (Neh 4:4 [Eng. v. 10]); they agree to return property to the poor (**וַיֹּאמְרוּ נָשִׁיב**) (Neh 5:12). But, now, they take initiative and thus instruct the scribe (**וַיֹּאמְרוּ לְעֹזְרָא**) to be a part of a serious business. This gesture of the people is unique in comparison to other events. For example, during Samuel's days when the menacing Philistines were oppressing Israel, the people volunteered to fast as a symbol of their return to Yahweh. However, here, the people turn to the law of Moses after they have suc-

¹⁷ It is more than “unity in diversity” which A. Taylor-Troutman observes; Michael W. Duggan does observe the parallelism on **כָּל־אִישׁ אֶחָד**, but we do it differently. See A. Taylor-Troutman, “Between Text and Sermon: Nehemiah 8:1–12,” *Int* 67 (2013): 58; Michael W. Duggan, *The Covenant Renewal in Ezra-Nehemiah (Neh 7:72b–10:40): An Exegetical, Literary, and Theological Study* (SBLDS 164; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 86.

¹⁸ Neh 2:13, 14, 15.

¹⁹ R. W. Klein thinks that the water gate becomes a convenient place for the common people to assemble because of its “non-sacral” nature. However, in our opinion, its import is much more than what Klein thinks. Taylor-Troutman merely acknowledges the permission of “lay leadership” without analyzing its symbolic import. Duggan observes the water gate being a “distinctive” location. See R. W. Klein, “The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah,” *NIB* 3:800; Taylor-Troutman, “Between Text and Sermon,” 59; Duggan, *Covenant Renewal*, 84.

²⁰ **וַיֹּאמֶר לְמַלְאָךְ אִם־עַל־הַמֶּלֶךְ טוֹב אֶגְדֹּת יִתְגַּדְּלִי; וְאָמַר לְמַלְאָךְ ... וְשַׁעֲרֵיהָ אֶכְלוּ בָאֵשׁ** (Neh 2:7); **וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם אֲתֶם רֹאִים הָרְעָה אֲשֶׁר אָנֹחֵנוּ** (Neh 2:17); **וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם אֲלֵהֶם הַשְּׂמִים הוּא יִצְלִיחַ; וְאָמַר אֶל־הַחֹרִים ... מִפְּנֵיהֶם אֶת־אֹדְנֵי הַגְּדֹל** (Neh 4:8).

לפניו (הרחוב אשר לפניו, 8:3)—further intensifies the idea of an obligatory service. That is to say, just as Nehemiah obliges to perform his service before the Persian king (לפניו ואשא אתהיזון ואתנה למלך ולא הייתי רע לפניו, Neh 2:1), so does Ezra before Yahweh's people.²³ Finally, as opposed to the book of Ezra which mentions Ezra the priest standing to adjudicate the matter, the book of Nehemiah mentions Ezra the scribe, not the priest, standing on the platform to read the law. Not only Ezra, but also the Levites are at the people's service. They are also reading the word, perhaps rereading it, and causing people to understand the message with interpretation.²⁴ Hence, the authority of Ezra is neutralized, because he is an agent of aid or service.

On the people's part, there is a comprehensive and complete participation in terms of attendance and attention. The author's rhetoric in presenting the attendees is important for its composition and purpose. In the OT, Israelite gatherings are called either a general assembly or a congregation of men (elders and leaders). But here the author calls it a gathering of men, women, and all that could understand (הבנים מלקטים עצים והאבות מבערים אתהאש והנשים לשות) (למאיש ועדאשה וכל מבין) (Neh 8:2). Although one finds a similar expression in 2 Sam 6:19 (למאיש ועדאשה), the occasion in that case is something that the state (King David) plans and orchestrates. However, the assembly (the attendees) mentioned in Nehemiah 8 is the ideal one which Moses had envisioned in Deut 31:12; that is, a comprehensive assembly that comes together to hear the divine word. The ideal nature in Nehemiah 8 is further underlined by the fact that here the attendees converge voluntarily in contrast to Moses's envisioned assembly which congregates at a command.²⁵ Also, the rhetoric of Nehemiah 8 as regards the people's attendance becomes all the more important because it stands as an antithesis to the pre-exilic gatherings of men and women (and even children) which engaged in idolatry and provoked Yahweh (כלהאנשים הידעים ביימקטרות נשיהם לאלהים אחרים וכלהנשים בצק).²⁶

Not only the attendance, but the attention of the people²⁷ also marks their participation in the event. The use of *שמע*, *אזן*, and *בין* suggest that the cerebral (understanding/discerning) and the attitudinal aspects of the people were mutually complimentary; they listened with seriousness and sincerity. Note that, in verses 2 and 3, the hiphil participle of *בין* (*המבינים* and *מבין*) is repeated twice, while *לשמע* and *ואזניו* stand in parallel to each other. This combination of *שמע* and *אזן* is found at the beginning of the book of Nehemiah in which Nehemiah pleads with God to hear his prayer with full attention (*לשמע אליתפלת עבדך*) (תהי נא אזנדקשבת... לשמע אליתפלת עבדך) (Neh 1:6). This means that the gravity of the people's attention to the divine word is

²³ There are other usages of *לפניו* in the OT that speak of a subordinate or an inferior being before a superior. For instance, Naaman stands before Elisha after being healed of his leprosy (*ויבא ויעמד לפניו*) (2 Kgs 5:15); Gehazi being dishonest contracts leprosy and leaves his master's presence (*ויצא מלפניו מצרע*) (*בשגל*, 2 Kgs 5:27).

²⁴ S. J. Lawson, "The Pattern of Biblical Preaching: An Expository Study of Ezra 7:10 and Nehemiah 8:1–18," *BSac* 158 (2001): 464; Philip. Y. Yoo, "On Nehemiah 8:8a," *ZAW* 127 (2015): 506.

²⁵ ... *בשעריך למען* (hiphil imperative).

²⁶ Jer 7:18; 44:15

²⁷ Note the brief remark of Taylor-Troutman, "Between Text and Sermon," 58.

similar to that of Yahweh compassionately listening to Nehemiah's prayer. The people's participation in listening to God's word—the combination of cerebral and attitudinal—is a fulfillment of the Mosaic instruction in the book of Deuteronomy on the one hand,²⁸ and an antithesis to the pre-exilic trend, especially before and after the fall of Jerusalem, on the other hand. For instance, the book of Jeremiah, which narrates circumstances leading to the exile, is replete with examples where the people become adamant, even arrogant, in not listening to the divine instruction and thus incurring Yahweh's wrath.²⁹

3. *The mass impact.* Noticeably, the mass movement emerges alongside, and is sustained by, the movement of the word. Here the word reaches all, not a select or a larger group. According to the author of Nehemiah, such a mass movement creates a mass impact.

a. *The people's return to Yahweh's presence.* The first mass impact is that the people return to Yahweh's presence. Before we make this point in Nehemiah 8, it is important to note the mutuality between Yahweh and his people that is foundational to Israel's life. Although the gift of the land is prominent in Yahweh's promise to Abraham³⁰—which is reiterated in Moses's encounter with Yahweh³¹—it is not so in Yahweh's first address to his people after they come out of Egypt. Here the focus is between Yahweh and the people: **וַאֲבָא אֲתִכֶּם אֵלַי** (Exod 19:4). Note that there is a literary shift from **אֵלַי וְאֶלְהֵאֲרָץ** to **אֵלַי**.³² Nehemiah 8 relives this mutuality—experiencing divine presence—in a unique way. The people are said to be in a standing posture when the word is opened (**עָמְדוּ כָּל־הָעָם**, v. 5).³³ This is an echo of Deuteronomy 4 as the people stand under the foot of mountain to hear the divine word in the immediate presence of Yahweh (**וַתִּקְרְבוּ וַתַּעֲמְדוּ תַּחַת הַהָר**, Deut 4:11). Nevertheless, Nehemiah 8 is unique in its democratization of all the people with respect to the word. Deuteronomy 4 is silent on Moses's physical position and posture—whether he is with Yahweh on the mountain or standing at the foot of the mountain—but Nehemiah 8 mentions that the clergy (the readers and interpreters) also remained standing (**וַיַּעֲמֵד אֶצְלוֹ מִתְּתִיבָהּ, וַיַּעֲמֵד עֲרֵא הַסֹּפֵר**, 8:4). While the omission of Moses's physical posture in Deuteronomy 4 may suggest his elevated status among the people, a corresponding posture between the clergy and the people in Nehemiah 8 underlines the common experience of the mass without any distinction.³⁴ Of course, one might argue for an elevated status of the clergy, especially

²⁸ Moses asks the Israelite community to hear and take the word seriously: **וַתִּשְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל שְׁמַע** (Deut 4:1); **וַתִּשְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל שְׁמַע** (Deut 5:1; 6:4; 9:1); **תִּשְׁמַעוּן אֶת הַמִּשְׁפָּטִים** (Deut 7:12); **וּמִלִּתֶּם אֶת עַרְלַת לִבְבְּכֶם** (Deut. 31:12); **לִמְעַן יִשְׁמְעוּ וְלִמְעַן יִלְמְדוּ** (Deut 10:16).

²⁹ For instance, **יַעַן אֲשֶׁר לֹא־שִׁמְעֶתֶם אֶת־דְּבָרֵי, וְלֹא־שִׁמְעֶתֶם, וְלֹא־שִׁמְעֶתֶם וְלֹא־הִטִּיתֶם אֶת־אָזְנוֹכֶם לְשִׁמְעַת, מוֹסֵר לְשִׁמְעַת אֶל־דְּבָרֵי נְאֻם־יְהוָה** (Jer 24:4, 7, 8); **אֲוִלֵי יִשְׁמְעוּ בֵּית יְהוּדָה** (Jer 35:13); **אֲוִלֵי יִשְׁמְעוּ בֵּית יְהוּדָה** (Jer 36:3); **הַדְּבָר הַדָּבָר אֲשֶׁר־דִּבַּרְתָּ אֵלֵינוּ בְּשֵׁם יְהוָה אֵינָנו שְׁמַעִים אֵלֶיךָ** (Jer 44:16).

³⁰ **אֵלֶי־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֲרָאָךְ** (Gen 12:1).

³¹ **אֵלֶי־אָרָץ טוֹבָה וְרַחֲבָה אֵלֶי־אָרָץ זָבַת חֶלֶב וְדָבָשׁ** (Exod 3:6).

³² This pattern of mutuality is evident in Deut 4 despite the land receiving some attention.

³³ The act of standing is much more than a "solidarity," which Taylor-Troutman observes. See Taylor-Troutman, "Between Text and Sermon," 59.

³⁴ Duggan considers the posture of standing to be a relationship between the people and Ezra. However, the question is: what is that relationship? See Duggan, *Covenant Renewal*, 88.

Ezra being on a higher platform and the people seeing him, much like the people seeing Moses and remaining standing in reverence when the former used to go to the tent of meeting.³⁵ However, again, there is a difference. Exodus 33 portrays the people standing at their tent doors and worshipping, while Moses speaks face to face with Yahweh in the tent of meeting (Exod 33:11). Although the whole Israelite community is within the vicinity of divine presence, there is no correspondence between the people and the leader (Moses) as he enjoys an unrestricted proximity to the deity. By contrast, in Nehemiah 8 there is a correspondence between the clergy and the people as both together praise Yahweh at the same place (וַיְבָרְךָ עַמְּרָא וַיִּבְרְךְ אֶת־יְהוָה הָאֱלֹהִים הַגָּדוֹל וַיַּעֲנוּ כָל־הָעָם אָמֵן אָמֵן, Neh 8:6). Further, the leader or the clergy has no special experience.³⁶ Notably, the book of Nehemiah speaks of two levels of association between the people and deity: it speaks of Yahweh's favor or the divine assistance (not presence) resting upon an individual leader (Nehemiah) or a group of people in relation to the rebuilding of the wall (Neh 2:18, 20), but in relation to reformation it speaks of the entire mass returning to the divine presence.³⁷ This is a reversal of the exilic condition. Israel's exile is not only about the people's dislocation from the land, but it is also about them being debarred from the divine presence (עַד־שָׁלִיכוּ אוֹתָם מֵעַל פְּנֵיו, Jer 52:3)—of course, Yahweh graciously becomes a "little sanctuary" for them in the exiled land (Ezek 11:16). Hence, their return to the land alone would have amounted to nothing without the people returning to Yahweh's presence of which Nehemiah 8 speaks.³⁸

b. *A reformed worship by the people.* The second mass impact is a reformed worship (וַיִּקְרְאוּ וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּ לַיהוָה אַפְסִים אֲרָצָה, Neh 8:6). It is important to note that the biblical data rarely uses this language for the pre-exilic Israel while referring to an event or an account of the people worshipping Yahweh. There are perhaps two occurrences in the OT: the first is used for the elders of Israel when they met Moses in Egypt (וַיִּקְרְאוּ וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ, Exod 4:31); and the other is used for Moses himself when he pleads with Yahweh on Israel's behalf after the golden calf episode and then encounters Yahweh (וַיִּקַּד וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ אֲרָצָה וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ, Exod 34:8).³⁹ At the same time, the bib-

³⁵ וַיִּבְרְךְ אִישׁ פֶּתַח אֹהֶלוֹ (Exod 33:8)

³⁶ Duggan thinks that the presence of the thirteen (whom he considers laymen) on the platform negates the clerical supremacy. Although Duggan's observation strengthens our argument, the problem with the observation is that Duggan himself acknowledges it to be "conjectural." Duggan, *Covenant Renewal*, 87.

³⁷ We do agree with Manfred Oeming that the building of the wall was a theological act which, for instance, symbolized the honor of Israel, sacredness of the community and a place for God's presence in the city; see Manfred Oeming, "The Real History: The Theological Ideas behind Nehemiah's Wall," in *New Perspectives on Ezra-Nehemiah: History and Historiography, Text, Literature, and Interpretation* (ed. Isaac Kalimi; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2012), 138–43. Nevertheless, we say that it is the word which realizes that presence among the people.

³⁸ Our argument differs from that of D. J. McCarthy who thinks that the Chronicler (the author of Ezra-Nehemiah) moves away from the Deuteronomic idea, which is that Deuteronomy relates the people to a person, but Nehemiah relates the people to the law (not a person). See D. J. McCarthy, "Covenant and Law in Chronicles-Nehemiah," *CBQ* 44 (1982): 25, 35, 41.

³⁹ As F. C. Fensham mentions, there are two other occurrences in the OT (Gen 24:26; Num 22:31). Both these occurrences refer to non-Israelites: Abraham's servant worships; and Balaam falls to the ground in the context of Yahweh chastising him. See F. C. Fensham, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*

lical data also uses the words of Neh 8:6 for condemning a rampant idol worship of the pre-exilic Israel.⁴⁰ This means that the mass reformation described in Nehemiah 8 rightly combines the two aspects of the people returning to the divine presence and a reformed worship. More importantly, the vital role of the word in the mass worship is underscored, since the report of worship is sandwiched between the reading and instruction/interpretation of the word—Ezra reads the scripture at the one end, and the Levites read and explain the scripture at the other end. Said differently, the word reaching the totality of the mass produces right worship among the people.

c. *A reformed attitude of the people.* The third mass impact is a reformed attitude or emotion. The text says that the people were weeping as a result of what they heard (כי בוכים כל העם בשמעם את דברי התורה, Neh 8:9). A scholarly opinion suggests that the weeping of the people was inappropriate because it did not befit the occasion⁴¹—the priestly class or the clergy dissuade the people from grieving. However, it is possible to suggest that the weeping was appropriate because it was a natural response to the word. Although most translations render the aforementioned clause as “all the people wept when they heard,” its tripartite assonance (כִּי, כָּל, and בָּ) suggests that one can also translate this as “all the people wept as they heard”⁴² or “or all the people wept accordingly when they heard.” The latter probable renderings seem to drive home the impact of the word on the people. The question here is: What does this weeping connote? In all probability, it connotes the people’s remorse and pain at failing to heed and do what the law required of them.⁴³ The repetition of the words אבל and בכה in Nehemiah 8 and 1 suggests that the people’s weeping is similar to, and perhaps more than, that of Nehemiah. Having heard the report, Nehemiah mourns and weeps over the pitiable condition of the people and the destroyed wall. This is followed by his fasting and petition to Yahweh that mentions the people’s willful disobedience of the law (... וְלֹא־שָׁמְרֵנוּ וְאֶת־מִשְׁפַּח עֲבָדֶיךָ, Neh 1:7).⁴⁴ Now, the post-exilic community reverses their attitude to the word, as they are full of remorse. If so, the dissuasion of the clergy (the priestly class) was incorrect in some sense because they seem to be overtaken by the sacredness of the occasion⁴⁵ and thus mistake the people’s grief for a nostalgic sentiment. This observation is plausible because in the post-exilic phase the Levites themselves become nostalgic. For instance, in contrast to the people engaging in a

(NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 217. In our opinion, worship seems to be obvious in the people’s posture despite the supplication aspect being there. Duggan mentions two other examples of the pre-exilic Israelites, but they are mentioned by the Chroniclers (1 Chr 29:20; 2 Chr 29:30). See Duggan, *Covenant Renewal*, 112.

⁴⁰ E.g. Exod 32:8; Judg 2:12; Isa 2:8.

⁴¹ Fensham, *Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*, 218–19. Klein says that the occasion was to be without any “bitterness;” See Klein, *Books of Ezra*, 801.

⁴² A few NIV translations render this way.

⁴³ Williamson, *Nehemiah*, 291.

⁴⁴ In addition to the people’s recalcitrant attitude (which we have mentioned already), one prominent example is that King Jehoiakim himself shows contempt for Yahweh’s word (Jeremiah 36).

⁴⁵ Notably, the expression of “holy/holiness” occurs three times in their speech (vv. 8, 9, 10).

joyful shout when the foundation of the second temple was laid, the Levites, who had seen the destroyed temple, weep during a celebration (Ezra 3:12).⁴⁶ It is true that the law in Deuteronomy calls people to gather at the chosen place during the sacred days and rejoice, but there is a greater focus on the presence of Yahweh⁴⁷ than the occasion, although the latter is important. Hence, having returned to divine presence and a reformed worship, as argued, it was proper for the people to be contrite by hearing the word. That the word reforms the emotion of the people becomes immediately clear in the following verse. Having complied with the priestly instruction, the people disperse for a joyful celebration. However, the text suggests that the word, not the community life (eating, drinking, and sharing food), is the main cause of the joy (וּלְכֹנּוּ כָּל־הָעָם לְאָכֹל . . . כִּי הֵבִינוּ בְּדִבְרֵי אֲשֶׁר הוֹדִיעוּ לָהֶם), Neh 8:12). The last clause beginning with כִּי stands in parallel to other clauses beginning with the same particle (כִּי בּוֹכִים כָּל־הָעָם, Neh 8:10; בְּיַחַדּוֹת יְהוָה הִיא מְעֻזָּכֶם, Neh 8:9). A synoptic reading of these verses suggests that the joy comes from the word. Here, the word refers to the Torah, and not the comforting words of the Levites and priest. That is to say, the word which causes brokenness and weeping in the people⁴⁸ is the same word that produces joy in them.⁴⁹ It must be noted that one of the consequences of Israel's eviction from the land is the absence of joy among the people.⁵⁰ However, this joy does not return automatically after the people return to the land. In fact, the book indicates that the people in the land are full of sadness and disgrace (בְּרַעַה גְּדֹלָה וּבְחַרְפָּה), Neh 1:2)⁵¹ while Nehemiah in Susa is sad—רַע occurs in Neh. 1:2 and is used four times in Neh 2:1–3 in order to describe Nehemiah's sadness. However, now, the people become joyful because they understand the word.⁵²

d. *A unique religio-community celebration.* The fourth mass impact is the common people engaging in a unique religio-community celebration. The following uniqueness of this celebration is noticeable.

The initiative shown by the common man impacts the leaders and the clergy—heads of the families and the priest and Levites—as they pay attention to the

⁴⁶ If both the books of Ezra and Nehemiah contain the “crying motif” for different reasons, as David Kraemer thinks, then our argument regarding priestly misunderstanding is correct. See “On the Relationship of the Book of Ezra and Nehemiah,” *JSTOT* 59 (1993): 83–84.

⁴⁷ אֶת־לִפְנֵי יְהוָה (Deut 12:12, 19; 16:11); אֶת־לִפְנֵי יְהוָה (Deut 16:16).

⁴⁸ While one reads about Yahweh giving a heart of flesh to the post-exilic community (Ezek 11:18–20), Nehemiah 8–11 underlines that such a heart transplant—the community being responsive to Yahweh—happens only when the due importance is given to the word.

⁴⁹ Contra McCarthy, *Covenant Renewal*, 34. Taylor-Troutman makes a general remark on the relationship between the word and the expression of joy; see, “Between Text and Sermon,” 60.

⁵⁰ For instance, Ezek 5:14 uses the word חַרְפָּה to describe the condition of the people who will be exiled from the land.

⁵¹ For instance, Jer 25:10; 30:19; 31:4, 7, 12, 13; 33:9.

⁵² According to G. C. I. Wong, Nehemiah's statement in Neh 8:10 means that Yahweh rejoices over the people as much as he was angry with their forefathers. Hence, Yahweh's joy for the people is their strength. Wong's interpretation strengthens our point that the people's joy is in understanding the word, especially Yahweh's attitude towards them in the past and present. See G. C. I. Wong, “A Note on Joy” in Nehemiah VIII 10,” *VT* 45 (1995): 383–86.

word of the law. Not only the initiative but also the intensity of the common people gets transferred to the clergy. While the common people listen to the law (הַתּוֹרָה) (כְּשִׁמְעֵם אֶת־דְּבָרֵי הַתּוֹרָה) (Neh 8:9), the leaders and the clergy seriously seek to understand the word (וְלִהְשִׁבִיל אֶל־דְּבָרֵי הַתּוֹרָה) (Neh 8:13)—note the literary shift from שמע to שכל, both preceded by prepositions. Such an influence from below, which transforms the professional clergy into passionate seekers of the law, is rare in the OT.

Also, the author conveys that the people's voluntary obedience to the word is critical to the celebration. The leaders and clergy find in the law that they should celebrate the feast of booths, and that this word must be published in the land. Notably, the author is not interested in highlighting whether the priests and Levites did actually make a proclamation in this regard, although that might be the case; but he is interested only in underlining the people's eager obedience to the word (וַיְבִיאוּ וַיַּעֲשׂוּ לָהֶם סֻכּוֹת הָעֵם וַיֵּצְאוּ) (Neh 8:16). In so doing, he breaks the command-compliance pattern in the book (the leader commands and the people comply, Nehemiah 2, 5, 7).

The celebration caused by the word is ubiquitous. While the law requires people to make booths (Lev 23:37–40), in Nehemiah 8 the people fill the city and the temple with them. The space covered by the booths can be put in a parallel structure as below:

- A—their roof
- A'—their courts
- X—in the court of the house of God
- B—on the water gate
- B'—on the gate of Ephraim

The sequence here is: one's house, the house of God and the outer place. This ubiquitous celebration in obedience to the word is a counterpart of Deuteronomy 6. Deuteronomy 6 speaks of the ubiquity of the word (that the word is discussed and meditated upon everywhere—inside and outside the house), but Nehemiah 8 shows that a voluntary obedience to the word results in a ubiquitous celebration. This is supported by the complete participation of the returnees (כָּל־הַקָּהָל) (הַשְּׁבִים מִן־הַשְּׁבִי) (Neh 8:17). Here the use of מִן־הַשְּׁבִי is important because it harks back to the condition of the exiles in Neh 1:3. It suggests that the word has produced a religious celebration in that community which was disgraced earlier.

The final uniqueness of the word-induced celebration is its unprecedented nature. That is to say, the people of Israel have not celebrated in this manner ever since the time of Joshua. This is clear from the literary-theological viewpoint. Literarily, there is wordplay between לֹא־עָשׂוּ and יָשׁוּעַ on the one hand and between בְּיַד יִשְׂרָאֵל and בְּיַד יְהוֹשֻׁעַ on the other hand. Theologically, the community of Nehemiah 8 is equated to the generation of Joshua that was loyal to Yahweh (Josh 24:31; Judg 2:7)—note the two words, יָמֵי יְהוֹשֻׁעַ and מִיָּמֵי יְשׁוּעַ, in Josh 24:31 and Neh 8:17. The unprecedented nature is also reflected in the concluding statement that “there

was very great rejoicing” (וַתְּהִי שִׂמְחָה גְדוֹלָה מְאֹד) Neh 8:17). The OT has usages such as joy/with rejoicing⁵³ or great joy/rejoicing⁵⁴ to characterize Israelite celebrations or community gladness, but rarely does the OT use the expression found in Neh 8:17.

e. *The common people rise to lead the way for further reform.* The fifth mass impact of the common people engaging with the word is that the common people themselves rise to lead the process of further reform that is decisive (we shall return to the point of decisiveness shortly). In Nehemiah 9, the clerical assistance reduces considerably, although it continues. This is a step further from the common people taking initiative in chapter 8 or the common people transferring the passion to the clergy. Here the common people, having separated themselves from foreigners, lead the prayer and confession. It is commonly opined that the separation is racial, referring to the people detaching from foreign wives.⁵⁵ While this is correct, one must not gloss over the ideological (religious) separation that is concomitant. The text refers to the common people in Neh 9:1 as בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל, and then it calls them וְרַע יִשְׂרָאֵל who have divided themselves (וַיִּבְדְּלוּ) from בְּנֵי נֶכֶר. In the book of Nehemiah, the word בְּנֵי is also used for denoting the relation of Tobiah (the Ammonite) with Israelites, and this relationship has forced Jewish leaders to agree with Tobiah’s idea and agenda (Neh 6:18): לֹא בִי־חֶתָּן הוּא בְּעַלֵי שְׂבוּעָה לֹא בִי־חֶתָּן הוּא: לְשִׁבְעֵיהָ בְּנֵי־אֲרָח וַיְהוּזֶן בָּנוּ לֶקַח אֶת־בַּת־מִשְׁלֵם בֶּן בְּרַכְיָהּ.

The double usage of בֵּי shows that a kinship or an association with a foreigner (Tobiah) means being in agreement with him. This means the common people who had separated from foreigners represent the righteous Israel whose lives are parallel to that of Nehemiah on the one hand and different from those of the foreigners on the other hand. Just as Nehemiah led the building process and opposed foreigners (Nehemiah 4–6), the righteous Israel in Nehemiah 8, who are ideologically divided from the foreigners, lead the process of rebuilding the covenant community.⁵⁶

A closer look at the text suggests that the common people assume the leadership role of Nehemiah and Ezra. (1) Nehemiah sits in fasting and confesses his sins and the sins of his ancestors (Neh 1:4, 6); now, the people stand in their place and do the same (וַיַּעֲמְדוּ וַיִּתְּנוּ עַל־חַטָּאתֵיהֶם וְעוֹנוֹת אֲבוֹתֵיהֶם) Neh 9:2). (2) Ezra stands on a wooden platform in order to read the law from the morning till noon; now, the people stand in their own places and do the same for a quarter of the day (וַיִּקְוּמוּ) Neh 9:3).⁵⁷ (3) On the earlier

⁵³ For instance, בְּשִׂמְחָה (1 Sam 18:6; 2 Sam 6:12); לְשִׂמְחָה (1 Chr 15:16) שִׂמְחִים (1 Kgs 8:66); שִׂמַּח (2 Kgs 11:14); וַיִּשְׂמַח (2 Kgs 11:20).

⁵⁴ שִׂמְחָה גְדוֹלָה (1 Kgs 1:40).

⁵⁵ M. Thiessen, “The Function of a Conjunction: Inclusivist and Exclusivist Strategies in Ezra 6:19–21 and Nehemiah 10:29–30?” *JOT* 34 (2009): 68; Williamson, *Nehemiah*, 311.

⁵⁶ Klein makes a one-line remark that the separation is from all foreigners, and not just foreign wives. However, he does not go on to analyze its significance. See Klein, *Books of Ezra*, 805–6.

⁵⁷ In his review of Duggan’s book, A. Siedlecki mentions four steps in which the Torah is read in Nehemiah 8–10. They are: Ezra’s reading (ch. 8); the nobles’ reading (ch. 8); the people’s reading (ch. 9); the people’s implementation of the reading (ch. 10). On the contrary, Fensham considers the reading by the people to be “impersonal.” See A. Siedlecki, review of M. W. Duggan, *The Covenant Renewal in Ezra-*

gathering, Ezra takes the lead for worship (Neh 8:6); now, the people worship themselves without a priest leading the event (ומִשְׁתַּחֲוִים לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֵיהֶם, Neh 9:3)—here one should note the shift from לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֵיהֶם הַגְּדוֹל (8:6) to לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֵיהֶם (9:3), indicating the fact that the people-led reform is based on an increasing covenantal intimacy between the people and Yahweh. (4) On the earlier occasion, the Levites stand by Ezra on the platform and assist him in his ministry (8:4); now, they stand on the stairs and do the same for the people (9:4). In short, a word-caused, people-initiated reformation gradually puts the common people on the center stage in order to continue further reform. They seem to be better placed to spread the idea of reform that is binding and decisive.⁵⁸

f. *A decisive implementation.* The final mass impact is the decisiveness of the reform. Two questions arise in this regard. First, were measures of the reform implemented in reality just as they are done in Ezra's reform? Second, does not this reform seem to be a failure as there comes about the final one in Nehemiah 13? To begin with the first question, although there is no direct evidence for suggesting an implementation of their promises, literary-theological observations suggest a strong plausibility for it.

(1) The writing and sealing of the covenant suggests a real implementation. While it is commonly believed that writing implies an unalterable status of the covenant,⁵⁹ it has something more to say than its unchangeable nature, especially in the exilic and the post-exilic context. That is to say, the writing and sealing of something is equal to an event or reality. For instance, the royal edict of Cyrus eventuates in the return of the exile; the royal edict of Xerxes eventuates in the massacre of Jews, the relief for Jews, and the retaliation of Jews; the royal decree of Darius pushes Daniel to the lions' den despite the former having a special rapport with the latter.⁶⁰ By the same token, the book of Nehemiah draws a connection between an unsealed letter and unreality—Sanballat sends an open or unsealed letter (וְאֵתֵּרֶת, פְּתוּחָה, Neh 6:5) to Nehemiah and the latter replies that the letter does not reflect what is happening on the ground (לֹא נִהְיָה בְּדַבְרֵים הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר אָתָּה, Neh 6:8). If so, the people's promises are not mere empty words; they are a reality.⁶¹ (2) A series of the impacts on the people (returning to divine presence, worship, reformed emotion, obedience and unique religious celebration, the people spearheading the reform movement) and their separation from the foreigners bears testimony to a decisive reform. If a well-intended, but high-handed, reform as described in Nehe-

Nehemiah (Neh 7:72B–10:40): *An Exegetical, Literary and Theological Study*, JBL 121 (2002): 755; Fensham, *Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*, 223.

⁵⁸ Duggan says that the community becomes highly democratized through the reading of the law and the resultant penitence; Duggan, *Covenant Renewal*, 155–56. However, we have shown that such democratization has not happened suddenly, it is the climax of how people have led the process of reform from the beginning.

⁵⁹ Williamson, *Nehemiah*, 332.

⁶⁰ 2 Chr 36:22–23; Ezra 1; Esth 3:9–14; 8:1–9:12; Dan 6:7–16.

⁶¹ Duggan offers a good literary explanation of writing and sealing an agreement, but his argument seems to be more on the legality of the document than the reality of it, although Duggan remotely alludes to it. Duggan, *Covenant Renewal*, 257–58.

miah 5 does produce a desired result, it is all the more probable that a reform agreed upon by all the people (leaders, clergy, and commoners across gender and age, Neh 10:28–29) will have a profound impact. (3) Precedence or a parallel event in the OT suggests that measures of the reform (Nehemiah 10) are implemented strongly because it shows the presence of a firm covenant (בְּרִיתִים אֲמִנָה) and promise,⁶² which is similar to Joshua 24. The people of Joshua's time make promises to follow Yahweh and they voluntarily make a covenant despite Joshua's assertion of their inability to do so; and, the book ends with a summary statement that there was a long-term result (Josh 24:19–31). In fact, the usage of אֲמִנָה is important in Neh 10:1. F. C. Holmgren explains this term in Neh 10:1 in light of Neh 9:6–10:1 and argues that the post-exilic community becomes unlike the unfaithful ancestors on the one hand and like the faithful father, Abraham, on the other hand.⁶³ In other words, the people-led reform is implemented with Abrahamic fidelity.

Concerning the second question (whether Nehemiah 13 nullifies Nehemiah 8–10), we suggest that the temporary nature of a reform (Nehemiah 8–10) does not necessarily negate its mass impact. Of course, scholars take a contrarian view. For instance, looking at the end in the book of Nehemiah (Nehemiah 13), Gary E. Schinttjer says that “the Ezra-Nehemiah narrative shows readers the constant need to repent and turn to God’s will, but not to trust in temporary reforms. The real hope is the same as it always has been, to wait upon God.”⁶⁴ Certainly, the sinful nature of humanity requires constant reforms, and the people-led reform described in Nehemiah 8–10 is no exception; however, it was critical for the post-exilic community. Perhaps Nehemiah’s final reform in chapter 13 can also be viewed slightly differently. That is, the elite (the high priest and the affluent), and not the common people, seem to be corrupt here.⁶⁵ Hence, the bad ending in Nehemiah 13 need not pale what has happened in Nehemiah 8–10. The criticality of Nehemiah 8–10 is that the idea of the people’s residence in Jerusalem, the holy city (לְשִׁבְתָּ בְּיְרוּשָׁלַם), עִיר הַקֹּדֶשׁ, Neh 11:1), and the dedication of the wall (Jerusalem being the dwelling place of Yahweh, Nehemiah 12) will be meaningless if the people remain unreformed. Hence, having confessed their sins and presented their petition to Yahweh, the common people move to implement reform in practical terms (Nehemiah 10).

⁶² For instance, לֹא נִקַּח, לֹא יָתַן (Neh 10:31 [Eng. v. 30], 32 [Eng. v. 31]); וְנָשַׁב (v. 32 [Eng. v. 31]).

⁶³ F. C. Holmgren, “Faithful Abraham and the *‘manā* Covenant: Nehemiah 9,6–10,1,” *ZAW* 104 (1992): 249–54.

⁶⁴ Gary E. Schinttjer, “The Bad Ending of Ezra and Nehemiah,” *BSac* 173 (2016): 56.

⁶⁵ Nehemiah 13 begins with a bad history of the Ammonites and then it proceeds to show the high priest offering accommodation to Tobiah, the Ammonite, in the temple. This means that the powerful lobby has reverted back to hobnobbing with the anti-Jewish group (cf. Neh 6:17–18). Following this, the chapter reports violations of agreements by the powerful and affluent (e.g. the sale of merchandise on the Sabbath). If so, then A. L. Ivry’s suggestion is correct, which is that Nehemiah tactically takes on the elite only after the construction and the dedication of the wall because Nehemiah did not want to antagonize this powerful Judean lobby midway. A. L. Ivry, “Nehemiah 6, 10: Politics and the Temple.” *JSJ* 3 (1972): 35–45.

IV. CONCLUSION

Contributing to the debate about discontinuity in Chronicles, Ezra-Nehemiah, this paper has examined three important reforms in these books (2 Chronicles 35–36; Ezra 9–10; Nehemiah 8–10) and argued for a thematic-ideational divergence between them. It has shown that the Chronicler's pattern of reform, a reform from above (one-man, authority, king), yields a low impact because the word is not accessible to the common people. While the author reports the contrition of king Josiah (Josiah rends his robe), he says nothing about the internal process of the people save their joining the celebration at the state's behest. Ezra's pattern of reform, a reform largely from below (by the people, but not fully led by them), yields a meaningful impact because the word increasingly moves towards the common man. Here the people and the leader together grieve over the evil done in Israel and the people stimulate and support Ezra to act. However, the pattern of reform seen in Nehemiah 8–10, a reform totally from below with a timely and temporary help of the clergy, yields a mass impact because the word reaches to all and creates a mass movement. The people-initiated/led reform impacts the post-exilic community in the following aspects of its transformation: divine presence, a reformed worship, a reformed attitude/emotion, a unique celebration, a gradual elevation of the commoners, and a decisive implementation of the reform.