

OpenTheo

July 29th: Nehemiah 8 & John 5:1-24

July 28, 2021



Alastair Roberts

Celebrating the Feast of Booths. The healing of the man at the Sheep Pool.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>). My reflections are searchable by Bible chapter here: <https://audio.alastairadversaria.com/explore/>.

If you have enjoyed my output, please tell your friends. If you are interested in supporting my videos and podcasts and my research more generally, please consider supporting my work on Patreon (<https://www.patreon.com/zugzwanged>), using my PayPal account (<https://bit.ly/2RLaUcB>), or by buying books for my research on Amazon (https://www.amazon.co.uk/hz/wishlist/ls/36WVSWCK4X33O?ref_=wl_share).

The audio of all of my videos is available on my Soundcloud account: <https://soundcloud.com/alastairadversaria>. You can also listen to the audio of these episodes on iTunes: <https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/alastairs-adversaria/id1416351035?mt=2>.

Transcript

Nehemiah chapter 8. And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the water gate, and they told Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses that the Lord had commanded Israel. So Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could understand what they heard, on the first day of the seventh month. And he read from it facing the square before the water gate, from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand.

And the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law. And Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that they had made for the purpose. And beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Aniah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseah on his right hand, and Paddaah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashem, Hashpadana, Zechariah, and Meshulam on his left hand.

And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people. And as he opened it all the people stood. And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, Amen, Amen, lifting up their hands.

And they bowed their heads and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground. Also Jeshua, Benai, Sherubbiah, Jamin, Aqab, Shabbatai, Hodiah, Maaseah, Kalita, Azariah, Jezobat, Hinnan, Peliah, the Levites, helped the people to understand the law, while the people remained in their places. They read from the book, from the law of God clearly, and they gave the sense so that the people understood the reading.

And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people, said to all the people, This day is holy to the Lord your God. Do not mourn or weep. For all the people wept as they heard the words of the law.

Then he said to them, Go your way, eat the fat, and drink sweet wine, and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready. For this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.

So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, Be quiet, for this day is holy, do not be grieved. And all the people went their way to eat and drink, and to send portions, and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them. On the second day the heads of fathers' houses of all the people, with the priests and the Levites, came together to Ezra the scribe in order to study the words of the law.

And they found it written in the law that the Lord had commanded by Moses that the people of Israel should dwell in booths during the feast of the seventh month, and that they should proclaim it and publish it in all their towns and in Jerusalem. Go out to the hills and bring branches of olive, wild olive, myrtle, palm, and other leafy trees to make booths, as it is written. So the people went out and brought them, and made booths for themselves, each on his roof, and in their courts, and in the courts of the house of God, and in the square at the water gate, and in the square at the gate of Ephraim.

And all the assembly of those who had returned from the captivity made booths and lived in the booths. For from the days of Jeshua the son of Nun to that day the people of Israel had not done so. And there was very great rejoicing.

And day by day, from the first day to the last day, he read from the book of the law of God. They kept the feast seven days, and on the eighth day there was a solemn assembly, according to the rule. Many commentators see a jarring disjunction between the section beginning in the last couple of verses of Nehemiah chapter 7 and concluding at the end of chapter 10 with the around in context.

Mark Thrunkevaid, for instance, argues that, in terms of narrative continuity, it would seem to make most sense to move directly from chapter 7 to chapter 11. Besides this,

the narrative switches from the first-person narrative of the material of the Nehemiah memoirs to a third-person narrative. The most prominent character in this chapter is Ezra the scribe and priest, leading several scholars to believe that this material originally belonged to the book of Ezra, before being moved to this point by an editor.

Nehemiah's role in chapters 8 to 10 is a minor one. Further questions are raised when we consider that, although Ezra had returned thirteen years previously to establish the teaching and enforcing of the law, this is the first evidence that we have of him giving the sort of teaching that he was supposed to give. Andrew Steinman pushes back against such arguments, maintaining that the current sequence of the book makes sense when we consider that these events intervene between the completion and the dedication of the wall because Jerusalem needed to be repopulated and there was little purpose in dedicating the wall if there were not enough people in Jerusalem to sustain it as a city.

First the temple must be restored, then the walls rebuilt, and then the city must truly be repopulated. And this repopulation of the city requires a dedication of the people and their formation as a faithful company through the instruction of the law. Only after that occurred would the time be ready for the dedication of the wall.

Thrombefeit argues that in chapter 7 verse 73 to chapter 8 verse 12, in chapter 8 verses 13 to 18, in chapter 9 verse 1 to 10 verse 39, we have three successive scenes with an identical sequence. They include a time reference and assembly, an encounter with the law, application and then response. There are further repetitions to be observed that strengthen these connections.

The gathering occurs on the first day of the seventh month, in Leviticus chapter 23 verses 23 to 25 we read of this day which is the feast of trumpets. The Lord spoke to Moses saying, speak to the people of Israel saying, in the seventh month on the first day of the month you shall observe a day of solemn rest, a memorial proclaimed with blast of trumpets, a holy convocation. You shall not do any ordinary work and you shall present a food offering to the Lord.

The seventh month, unsurprisingly, was the principal month of the Jewish calendar, the Sabbath month as it were. It contained the feast of trumpets on the first day, the day of atonement on the tenth, the feast of tabernacles on the fifteenth to the twenty-first and a final sacred assembly on the twenty-second. Ten days of the month then were feast or fast days.

The first day of the seventh month was also a New Year's festival. Interestingly, there is no reference to the day of atonement in this chapter. This is the month after the wall was completed, six days after the wall's completion and fifty-eight days after work on it first began.

The people assemble in the square facing the water gate which was on the east wall although it wasn't one of the gates that we read of in chapter 3, presumably it wasn't part of the restored wall. The people themselves seem to be the ones who want the law to be read to them and they summon Ezra to do so, seemingly as a scholar of the text as he is referred to as the scribe. Such a public reading of the law is similar to that which is prescribed in Deuteronomy chapter 31 verses 10 to 13 although this reading is a couple of weeks prior to the time of the feast of tabernacles, the time when such a reading would typically occur and does within this chapter too.

And Moses commanded them, at the end of every seven years, at the set time in the year of release, at the feast of booths, when all Israel comes to appear before the Lord your God at the place that He will choose, you shall read this law before all Israel in their hearing. Assemble the people, men, women and little ones, and the sojourner within your towns, that they may hear and learn to fear the Lord your God, and be careful to do all the words of this law, and that their children, who have not known it, may hear and learn to fear the Lord your God, as long as you live in the land that you are going over the Jordan to possess. The similarities include the general assembly of the people, including women and children.

Ezra reads from early in the morning until noon, around six hours. As Andrew Steinman notes, this would not have been long enough to read the entirety of the Pentateuch. Presumably Ezra was reading a substantial body of prominent passages in it, maybe even up to half its contents, or perhaps he was particularly focusing upon the book of Deuteronomy.

He stood upon a wooden platform so that he could be seen by all, and was flanked by prominent leaders of the people. The assembly was not merely a long scriptural teaching session, but was also a corporate act of worship. Ezra led them in praising the Lord, with the people answering Amen and bowing before the Lord.

Thirteen named Levites assisted Ezra in his reading and instruction of the people. There are different ways to understand what they were doing. They could have been giving the people a text in Aramaic, while Ezra read the text in the original Hebrew, or each one of them might be teaching some part of the assembly, ensuring that everyone grasped what they needed to.

Charles Fensham notes the similarity between this and the behaviour of the Levites during the reign of Jehoshaphat, described in 2 Chronicles 17, verse 9. And they taught in Judah, having the book of the law of the Lord with them. They went about through all the cities of Judah and taught among the people. From verse 8 it seems more likely that the Levites were translating, and also giving the sense of what they were translating.

At this point we finally see Ezra and Nehemiah together, engaged in a single act. Perhaps surprisingly, considering their stature among the people, and the fact that they

were contemporaries working in Jerusalem, we don't read much about them acting together. However, when we consider the short span of time that Nehemiah's account covers to this point, the events of this chapter are less than a year from his first hearing of the report from Jerusalem, and little more than a couple of months or so since he arrived in Jerusalem and started rebuilding the walls.

It probably isn't all that strange. One of the concerns of the Levites was to ensure that the people recognised and observed the character of the day as a feast day. Although they were appropriately convicted by the words of the law, the Lord desired that His people would have joy on that day, and their mourning was out of keeping with the day's character.

Ezra instructed them to honour the day as one of feasting, encouraging them to enjoy God's good gifts and to show charity. Such feelings and expressions of joy were not merely to be instinctive responses, but were to be things that the people practised at appropriate times, so that they would be formed rightly. Joy was supposed to be at the heart of Israel's life, and the festival days were important for this reason.

The people were to rejoice in the Lord, expressing their confidence in His power and support, their delight in His gifts, and their love for each other. They were also to be assured of the Lord's delight and joy in them, that they were His people and that He intended their good. Developing such a joy would be a source of great strength for the people, so although mourning on account of their sins was important, the priority of cultivating joy eclipsed that at this time.

The main company of the people dispersed after the celebration of the Feast of Trumpets. However, on the following day the heads of the fathers' houses, the priests and the Levites, continued their study of the law. As they read the law, they were reminded of the instructions for the Feast of Booths, Tabernacles or Ingathering, which they had almost forgotten.

In Exodus, all that is instructed concerning the Feast of Ingathering is the time and that it is a pilgrimage festival, in chapter 23 verse 16 and chapter 34 verse 22. Numbers chapter 29 gives an extensive list of sacrifices for each day of the feast. Deuteronomy chapter 16 verses 13 to 15 focuses on the rejoicing and feasting.

You shall keep the Feast of Booths seven days, when you have gathered in the produce from your threshing floor and your winepress. You shall rejoice in your feast, you and your son and your daughter, your male servant and your female servant, the Levite, the Sargent, the fatherless, and the widow who are within your towns. For seven days you shall keep the feast to the Lord your God at the place that the Lord will choose, because the Lord your God will bless you in all your produce and in all the work of your hands, so that you will be altogether joyful.

Leviticus chapter 23 verses 33 to 43 provides the fullest instructions for the celebration however. And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Speak to the people of Israel, saying, On the fifteenth day of this seventh month and for seven days is the Feast of Booths to the Lord. On the first day shall be a holy convocation.

You shall not do any ordinary work. For seven days you shall present food offerings to the Lord. On the eighth day you shall hold a holy convocation and present a food offering to the Lord.

It is a solemn assembly. You shall not do any ordinary work. These are the appointed feasts of the Lord, which you shall proclaim as times of holy convocation, for presenting to the Lord food offerings, burnt offerings and grain offerings, sacrifices and drink offerings, each on its proper day, besides the Lord's Sabbaths and besides your gifts and besides all your vow offerings and besides all your freewill offerings which you give to the Lord.

On the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when you have gathered in the produce of the land, you shall celebrate the Feast of the Lord seven days. On the first day shall be a solemn rest, and on the eighth day shall be a solemn rest. And you shall take on the first day the fruit of splendid trees, branches of palm trees and boughs of leafy trees and willows of the brook.

And you shall rejoice before the Lord your God seven days. You shall celebrate it as a feast to the Lord for seven days in the year. It is a statute forever throughout your generations.

You shall celebrate it in the seventh month. You shall dwell in booths for seven days. All native Israelites shall dwell in booths, that your generations may know that I made the people of Israel dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt.

I am the Lord your God. Leviticus gives an explanation for the festival, that it commemorates the deliverance from Egypt and it also includes another element unique to its instructions, the practice of living in booths. While we have references to the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles earlier in the pre-exilic period in the land and also in Ezra chapter 3 verse 4, verse 17 might suggest that the practice of living in booths had been neglected since the time of Joshua, perhaps because it was more complicated when there was a central sanctuary and a feast was observed as a pilgrimage feast.

Leviticus doesn't seem to stipulate that it needed to be celebrated at a central location as the other laws of the Feast of Tabernacles did in the other books of the Pentateuch. Alternatively, the point might be that this feast of booths exceeded all previous celebrations of a feast since the people first entered the promised land. In celebrating the Feast of Booths, commemorating the Exodus and recalling Joshua the son of Nun, there is another association drawn between the Exodus generation and the returnees as

a new Exodus generation, patterning themselves after those who went before.

Ezra reads from the book of the law every single day of the feast, this was usually the practice on sabbatical years. Steinman argues that we should relate this to the events of chapter 5 earlier in that year, where Nehemiah was calling the rich Jews to forgive the debts of their poorer brethren, which would have been done in the Sabbath year. As a festival, the Feast of Booths recalled the very first day of the Exodus, when Israel left their settled habitations in Egypt and stepped out following the Lord and his servant Moses, staying in a place called Sukkoth.

This festival was to be one in which Israel joyfully revisited the very dawn of its history as a nation. It was to relive its calling forth from Egypt in its youth. The joy and the commemoration of its earlier days serves as a sort of national reviving, a return to a sort of childhood once more.

A question to consider, what are some of the ways in which Christians are trained in the cultivation of joy? John chapter 5 verses 1 to 24. After this there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. Now there is in Jerusalem by the sheep gate a pool, an Aramaic called Bethesda, which has five roofed colonnades.

In these lay a multitude of individuals, blind, lame, and paralyzed. One man was there who had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there, and knew that he had already been there a long time, he said to him, Do you want to be healed? The sick man answered him, Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, and while I am going another steps down before me.

Jesus said to him, Get up, take up your bed, and walk. And at once the man was healed, and he took up his bed and walked. Now that day was the Sabbath.

So the Jews said to the man who had been healed, It is the Sabbath, and it is not lawful for you to take up your bed. But he answered them, The man who healed me, that man said to me, Take up your bed and walk. They asked him, Who is the man who said to you, Take up your bed and walk? Now the man who had been healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had withdrawn, as there was a crowd in the place.

Afterward Jesus found him in the temple, and said to him, See, you are well. Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you. The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had healed him.

And this was why the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because he was doing these things on the Sabbath. But Jesus answered them, My Father is working until now, and I am working. This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.

So Jesus said to them, Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise. For the Father loves the Son, and shows him all that he himself is doing.

And greater works than these will he show him, so that you may marvel. For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will. For the Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son, that all may honour the Son, just as they honour the Father.

Whoever does not honour the Son does not honour the Father who sent him. Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.

In John chapter 5, Jesus once again goes up to Jerusalem for a feast of the Jews. This is the one occasion where the feast in question is not named, leaving the reader to speculate which it was. While at the feast, Jesus encounters an infirm man near a pool, by what is most likely the sheep gate.

Although it is likely that this is referring to a gate in the north east of the city, that it is a gate is not explicit in the original text. It could have been a place where sheep were found, or even the sheep pool. The place was named Bethesda, or perhaps Bethsaida in Aramaic.

Alternatively, Raymond Brown claims that we might best read this as the sheep pool near the pool of Bethesda, with reference being made to two different pools. The evangelist further describes the location as having five porticos or colonnades. Last century archaeologists excavated what seems to be the pool in question, which has, as the text describes, five colonnades, as the pool which is surrounded by colonnades on its four sides also has a partition through its centre.

Some manuscripts, reflected in various English translations, refer to an angel that would come down to stir the waters, healing the first person who stepped in afterwards of whatever their infirmity or illness was. Many other translations have nothing where this verse is found in verse 4. However, while the verse may not be authentic, the beliefs concerning a supernatural pool that it describes likely are a genuine tradition and might help us to make more sense of the narrative. According to the popular belief, those who went in could be healed of their illnesses.

Jesus then would be coming to a situation where the man who has been vainly waiting for healing at this pool was some special powers and yet has not received the healing that he has hoped for. No one is able to help him to get into the pool when the water is stirred up and as soon as he tries to get in, someone steps down before him. In the Gospel of John there have already been several mentions of water in relation to

cleansing and other such themes.

In chapter 1 there was John's baptism. In chapter 2 the water was turned into wine from the waters of purification in the water pots. In chapter 3 Jesus spoke of the new birth of water and the spirit and John's baptism was mentioned again.

In chapter 4 Jesus' disciples were baptising and he offered living water to the woman at the well. Now in chapter 5 there is a healing pool. Keeping our eyes on the ball of the theme of water, we might see Jesus as the one who brings new waters, new waters to drink, new waters of cleansing and now new waters of healing.

The supernatural stirring of the waters of the pool might remind us of the spirit of God over the face of the deep in Genesis chapter 1 verse 2 or of the wind at the flood or perhaps of the wind at the Red Sea. The setting is also an evocative one. There are infirm sheep at a pool struggling to get to the water so that they will be able to be healed and enter into liberty at the other side.

Moses was the great shepherd of Israel who led the flock of his people with his shepherd's staff. The people through Moses and Joshua were led through the waters of the Red Sea and through the waters of the Jordan into liberty in the promised land. Later in the Gospel Jesus will speak of himself as the good shepherd.

He is the one who seeks out lost sheep like the woman of Samaria. He heals injured sheep like the man in this chapter. He provides good pasture and food as we see in chapter 6. The reference to the sheep pool or the sheep gate might not be accidental it might be part of John's subtle characterisation of Jesus in his Gospel.

The man has had an infirmity for 38 years. This is perhaps an important number as we see in Deuteronomy chapter 2 verse 14. Israel had wandered for 38 years after their failure to enter into the land.

In this chapter Jesus might be playing the part of a new Joshua whose name he shares. As we see elsewhere in the Gospel Jesus has a supernatural knowledge of people and before talking with this man he already knows about his condition and the length of its duration. He takes the initiative on this occasion in the healing, approaching the man and asking whether he wishes to be healed, to which the man answers in terms of the means by which he presumed that healing would come from the supernatural pool.

However Jesus offers healing that exceeds that of such waters. He instructs the man to get up, take up his bed and walk. Once again the miracle is performed through a simple instruction that is obeyed.

The enjoyment of healing requires the man to receive the words of Jesus in a trusting response. Jesus gives rest to the man who takes up his bed, an instrument of rest, perhaps as a part of the sign. The man, having been so miraculously delivered, is then

confronted by Jewish religious leaders who accuse him of breaking the Sabbath as he is carrying his bed.

The man responds by telling them that the man who miraculously healed him had instructed him to do so. The leaders then want to find the man responsible for the healing and the subsequent breach of Sabbath regulations but Jesus has disappeared. This sign, the third of the signs of the Gospel, has a similar character to the ones that preceded it.

There is a significant amount of narrative devoted to the conversations that follow the performance of the sign. In the turning of the water into wine and the healing of the royal official's son, as in this sign, Jesus himself is not in the immediate narrative frame immediately after the sign. John seems to be downplaying the immediate physical presence of Jesus and emphasising the efficacy of his word when it is trusted and obeyed.

When Jesus encountered the man again later in the temple, he warned him, once again revealing his intimate supernatural knowledge of people, not to sin any more, lest something worse might befall him. In the parallel passage of chapter 9, the question of whether people suffer illness on account of sin is explicitly raised and Jesus denies that the man born blind was blind on account of either his own or his parents' sin. However, in the case of this infirm man, his own sin seemingly was a cause of his condition in some manner.

After Jesus left, the man informed the Jews that Jesus was the one who had healed him. As a result of this, the Jewish authorities persecuted Jesus as they thought that he was violating the Sabbath. When reading such passages about Sabbath controversies, it is important not merely to treat such acts as exceptions, as if Jesus were just flaunting some special law-breaking privileges, or as if some technical explanation of Sabbath law would excuse these specific acts.

No, we should recognise that Jesus is rather fulfilling the meaning of Sabbath through such actions, and doing so in a way that relates him with God. The purpose of Sabbath was always to give rest to man. In such an act of healing, Jesus was giving rest to the infirm man, fulfilling the meaning of Sabbath, not undermining it.

However, while we find such arguments in the synoptics, here Jesus goes even further in his explanation of his Sabbath practice. When the Jewish leaders accuse him, he claims that his works are like his father's. God rested on the Sabbath day.

However, God is clearly not inactive in the world. His rest from the work of creation is consistent with his work in providential care for his creation. God isn't breaking the Sabbath.

Indeed, it would be nonsensical to claim that he is. Jesus' own practice of healing should be considered, he's arguing, in a similar manner. Jesus claims an intimate relationship with God.

God is his father. He also claims that he, the son, is acting like the father. To the Jewish religious authorities, this was an extremely incendiary statement, nothing short of blasphemous.

They thought, and the evangelist agrees, that in such a statement Jesus was making himself equal with God. Jesus responds to this charge, not by denying it, but by elaborating his earlier statement, speaking more directly about the different ways in which his own work relates to that of his father. His claims are truly startling.

He enjoys judgment, the power to raise the dead, life in himself, and divine works. Resurrection, new creation, is already underway within his action. He's starting the work of this new creation, fulfilling the Sabbath, and anticipating the great renewal of all things.

A question to consider. Within the first half of the Gospel of John we see a number of different signs in succession, of which this is the third. Prior to this point we had the turning of the water into wine, and the healing of the nobleman's son.

I believe that there are parallels between these three signs and the three signs that follow them. More particularly the sign of the healing of the man in chapter 5 parallels with the sixth sign of the healing of the blind man in chapter 9. Reading these two chapters alongside each other, what parallels can you observe?