

THE FINAL VERSE OF NEHEMIAH

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INTRODUCTION

The Book of Nehemiah ends the narrative of the history of the Jewish People as presented in Tanakh with Nehemiah returning to Jerusalem after leaving *in the thirty second year of King Artaxerxes of Babylon* (Neh. 13:6). While he was away, the various reforms that he instituted earlier had collapsed; his enemy Tobiah, sidekick of the villain Sanballat, was given an office *in the courts of the House of God* (Neh. 13:7), *the portions of the Levites had not been contributed* (Neh. 13:10), there was widespread desecration of Shabbat (Neh. 13:15-18), and intermarriage resumed (Neh. 13:23-24). The end of the last chapter of Nehemiah details how Nehemiah set matters back on the correct path. Nehemiah asks God to remember these achievements to his credit (Neh. 13:14, 22, 31).

At the end of his book, Nehemiah specifically notes four accomplishments, *I purged them of every foreign element*, ending the intermarriages, *and arranged for the priests and Levites to work each at his task by shifts* (Neh. 13:30), something disrupted when the tithes were no longer given and the Levites left their Temple duties to go off *each to his fields* (Neh. 13:10). The very last things noted in the last verse of the book are the resumption of *the wood offering at fixed times* and bringing *the first fruits* (Neh. 13:31).

Why does the story of Tanakh end with these verses? It should be noted that two other works from this era, Chronicles and Malachi, end with more obviously powerful verses. Chronicles concludes with the “happy ending” of the return to Zion, *In the first year of Cyrus, king of Persia, when the Lord’s word pronounced by Jeremiah had come to pass, the Lord stirred the spirit of Cyrus, king of Persia, and he issued a proclamation throughout his kingdom by word of mouth and written word as well: “Thus says Cyrus, king of Persia: The Lord, God of the heavens, has granted me all the kingdoms of the earth, and He has charged me to build Him a House in Jerusalem in Judah. Whoever is among you from all His people, may the Lord his God be with him, and let him*

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go up!’” (II Chron. 36:22-23). Malachi, last of the prophets, ends with powerful verses describing the future redemption, *Remember the Teaching of Moses My servant, which I commanded to him at Horeb, statutes and laws for all of Israel. Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the Lord. And he will return the hearts of parents back to their children and the hearts of children back to their parents, lest I come and lay the earth waste* (Malachi 3:22-24). Compared to these books, the ending of Nehemiah, the very end of the chronological biblical narrative, stands out as not being particularly uplifting or impactful.

AS IS WRITTEN IN THE TORAH

The two particular elements mentioned in the last verse of Nehemiah are found side by side earlier in chapter 10, in the description of the code that the nation vowed by solemn oath to adhere to. *We cast lots for the wood offering that the priests, the Levites, and the people would bring to the House of our God at fixed times each and every year, to be burned on the altar of the Lord our God, as is written in the Torah. Also to bring to the House of the Lord the first fruits of our land and all the first fruits of all trees each and every year; also the firstborn of our sons and of our animals – as written in the Torah – while the firstborn of our cattle and sheep will be brought to the House of our God, to the priests serving in our God’s House* (Neh. 10:35-37). However, the code continues there with giving *the first part of our dough*, the priestly portions and also the tithes for the Levites (Neh. 13:38), and Nehemiah’s innovation of the storeroom in the Temple to distribute these properly (Neh. 10:39-40).

Why did Nehemiah choose to end his account in chapter 13 with the bringing of first fruits, rather than the tithes, the concluding part of the code in chapter 10? Note also that in the code itself the order of reformations is intermarriage (Neh. 10:31), wood offering (Neh. 10:35), first fruits (Neh. 10:36) and then tithes (Neh. 10:38). Here the same order is followed, except that the tithes were moved earlier, everything else stays in the same relative order. It is as if a special effort is made to end the Book of Nehemiah with the wood offering and first fruits in particular.

The first thing to take note of is that in the code in Nehemiah chapter 10, only two of the reforms employ the statement *as is written in the Torah*, the bringing

of the wood offering (Neh. 10:35) and the first fruits (Neh. 10:37), the same two elements found in the final verse of Nehemiah. None of the other reforms use this language, even though they are found in the Torah as well, such as observing the sabbatical year (Neh. 10:32) and bringing tithes (Neh. 10:38). Other elements of the code are certainly rooted in the Torah, such as observing Shabbat, even though the particular matter mentioned here of a prohibition against trade on Shabbat isn't explicitly mentioned in the Torah (Neh. 10:32). The fact is that out of all the reforms listed the wood offering is the one that is not mentioned in the Torah at all, yet here it gets the clause *as is written in the Torah* (Neh. 10:35).

We can now understand that Nehemiah chose to end his book by talking about the two practices that he earlier described as being *written in the Torah*. The question now becomes, why are the wood offering and the first fruits the only elements that have the phrase *as is written in the Torah* attached to them?

This question is not addressed by the classic Jewish exegetes. In modern times, R. Chaim Dov Rabinowitz, in his work *Da'at Soferim*, explains that these two reforms needed to be emphasized since they both entailed financial hardship. There wasn't an abundant amount of wood available at the time, which caused the institution of a wood offering to be established at this point in history, and finding enough wood for the altar and transporting it to the Temple was not a simple matter and needed encouragement. So too the bringing of the first fruits and the first born animals, particularly since most of the priests lived in Jerusalem at the time and bringing a young first born animal all the way to the Temple was presumably not an easy matter.¹

This approach is not very convincing, as many other of Nehemiah's reforms can also be similarly understood to entail financial or other burdens, particularly observance of the Sabbatical year (Neh. 10:32), for which various legal loopholes have been created throughout Jewish history in order to avoid the financial difficulty of its observance. Yet only the wood offering and first fruits are identified here as being rooted in the Torah.

THE FIRST FRUITS

The sanctified status of first born people and animals is explicitly mentioned in Exodus 13:2, *Consecrate every firstborn to Me. Man and beast, the first to emerge from every womb among the Israelites is Mine* and explained in Numbers 3:13, *On the day I struck down all the firstborn in Egypt, I consecrated*

every firstborn in Israel to Myself, man and animal. They are to be Mine; I am the Lord. This is true for the first fruits as well, as described in Exodus 23:19, Bring the best first fruits of your land to the House of the Lord your God, and in detail in Deuteronomy 26:1-10, When you have come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a possession, and have taken possession and settled in it, you shall take some of every first fruit of the soil, which you harvest from the land that the Lord your God is giving you. Put it in a basket and go to the place that the Lord your God will choose as a dwelling for His name. You shall go to the priest officiating at that time and say to him, 'I declare today to the Lord your God that I have come into the land that the Lord swore to our ancestors to give us.' The priest shall take the basket from your hand and set it down before the altar of the Lord your God. You shall then make this declaration before the Lord your God: 'My ancestor was a wandering Aramean. He went down into Egypt and lived there as a stranger, just a handful of souls, and there he became a nation – large, mighty, and great. And the Egyptians dealt cruelly with us and oppressed us, subjecting us to harsh labor. We cried out to the Lord, God of our ancestors. And the Lord heard our voice and He saw our oppression, our toil, and our enslavement. The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and His arm stretched forth, with terrifying power, with signs, and with wonders. He brought us into this place and He gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and with honey. And now I am bringing the first fruit of the land that You, O Lord, have given me.'

These verses shed light on why the first born and first fruits would have been singled out with the phrase *as is written in the Torah*. The whole concept of the sanctity of the firstborn is connected to the redemption from slavery, the foundation of the relationship between God and Israel. The declaration made when presenting the first fruits also hearkens back to the very beginnings of the Israelite nation as God's people. It is the foundational recollection of the God redeeming the Israelites from Egypt and bringing them into the Land of Israel, which was chosen to form the backbone of the exegetical section of the Passover Seder. Furthermore, it is an expression of the unique conception of Israel's relationship to the land as given to them by God.² This would have been particularly meaningful at the time of Jews returning to Israel from the Babylonian exile. We can now understand that the phrase *as is written in the*

Torah goes beyond simply stating that there is a biblical source for a command, it denotes that the principle involved is considered a foundation of the *Torah*.

THE WOOD OFFERING

With this understanding we can appreciate the significance of the wood offering, and how it could be described *as is written in the Torah* when there is no biblical source for this practice. The phrase here refers to the command, *The altar fire shall be kept alight; it shall not go out. Every morning the priest shall add wood to it* (Lev. 6:5). The wood offering ensures that this command is fulfilled.³

It should be noted that in the books of Tanakh that refer to the service of the Second Temple, the tamid sacrifice in particular is given prominence. The consecration of the altar, before the rest of the Second Temple was constructed, refers to the tamid sacrifice being re-established (Ezra 3:5), and it is noted specifically as something that money is collected for (Neh. 10:34). Even Daniel, in his vision describing the troubles in the Second Temple, notes that *the regular offering was suspended* (Dan. 10:11), and that *an army was arrayed iniquitously against the regular offering* (Dan. 10:12) and that *the regular offering will be forsaken* (Dan. 10:13). This emphasis on the importance of the regular tamid sacrifice may indicate a shift to stressing the importance of the consistency of daily service in an era where prophetic inspiration was dwindling and would soon end. Note also that the phrase *as is written in the Torah* is found twice in 2 Chronicles referring to the Temple sacrifices (23:18, 31:3), both times with specific mention of the tamid sacrifice.

The wood offering, established in order to make sure that the altar fires remain burning and that all the regular sacrifices are offered, represents the foundational element of the consistent and uninterrupted nature of divine service, particularly in the post-divine inspiration era as the Tanakh comes to a close, a situation that we continue to be in today.

THE CONCLUSION OF NEHEMIAH

Beyond representing two foundational ideas, recalling the Exodus and uninterrupted divine service, the sanctity of the firstborn and the wood offering may also represent two main concerns of the Ezra-Nehemiah narrative. The main story of Ezra 1-6 is the building of the Second Temple and restoration of the sacrificial service. Once Ezra arrives, the problem that he deals with is

intermarriage (Ezra 9-10). The main story of Nehemiah 1-6 is the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. He also deals with the problem of intermarriage in the very end of the last chapter of Nehemiah (Neh. 13:1-3, 23-27).

It may be that the wood offering is specifically noted at the end as it comes to maintain the Temple service which was the focus of most of the beginning of Ezra, and the first fruits is a reference to the special status of the Israelites, *Thus says the Lord: Israel is My first-born son* (Ex. 4:22). The distinctive status of the Israelites lies at the core of the prohibition against intermarriage. In this understanding, the ending of Nehemiah contains a reference to the main concerns of the Ezra-Nehemiah narrative, Temple construction and service and the prohibition against intermarriage. This would make the wood offering and first fruits parallel the achievements listed in the previous verse (Neh. 13:30), *I purged them of every foreign element*, referring to stopping intermarriage, *and arranged for the priests and Levites to work each at his task by shifts*, referring to ensuring the proper functioning of the Temple service.

THE CONCLUSION OF TANAKH

While at first glance the final verses of Nehemiah and Tanakh in general may not seem particularly meaningful, we have seen that it was exactly these elements that were emphasized earlier with the statement *as is written in the Torah*. This emphasis can be understood as indicating foundational principles, or as a reference to the chief concerns of the final narratives of Tanakh, making the wood offering and first fruits an appropriate way to end Nehemiah.

NOTES

1. Chaim Dov Rabinowitz, *Da'at Soferim – Nehemiah* (Jerusalem: Da'at Yisrael, 1976), pp. 101-102.
2. See Martin Buber, *On the Bible: Eighteen Studies* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2000), p. 122, “But of all the prayers of the first fruits in the world that I know there is only one in which, in contrast to all the others, God is glorified for his gift of a *land* to the worshipper” (emphasis in the original).
3. Mordechai Zer-Kavod, *Da'at Mikra – Ezra Nehemiah* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1994), p. 122; Jacob M. Myers, *Anchor Bible – Ezra Nehemiah* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1965), p. 179.



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