

Nehemiah 9:14

“The Sabbath as a Key Part of Israel’s Heritage”

“So You made known to them Your holy sabbath, and laid down for them commandments, statutes and law, through Your servant Moses.”

The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah detail many of the challenges faced by the Jews who returned to the Land of Israel, following the exile of the Southern Kingdom to Babylon.¹ The record of Nehemiah ch. 9 includes a recitation of many of the corporate sins of Israel throughout history, up to the then-present (9:1). The narrative record includes a repetition of the many acts of God, back to the Creation (9:6), His covenant with Abraham (9:7-8), the Exodus (9:9-12), the theophany of Mount Sinai (9:13a), the formal giving of the Torah commandments (9:13b), and the formal institution of the seventh-day Sabbath (9:14). The history of Ancient Israel from the wilderness sojourn, up to the time of the Assyrian invasions and subsequent aftermath (9:15-37), is further noted.

Within this national review of Israel’s history, the institution of the seventh-day Sabbath or *Shabbat* is important enough to be mentioned:

“You alone are the LORD. You have made the heavens, the heaven of heavens with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. You give life to all of them and the heavenly host bows down before You. You are the LORD God, who chose Abram And brought him out from Ur of the Chaldees, and gave him the name Abraham. You found his heart faithful before You, and made a covenant with him to give *him* the land of the Canaanite, of the Hittite and the Amorite, of the Perizzite, the Jebusite and the Girgashite—to give *it* to his descendants. And You have fulfilled Your promise, for You are righteous. You saw the affliction of our fathers in Egypt, and heard their cry by the Red Sea. Then You performed signs and wonders against Pharaoh, against all his servants and all the people of his land; for You knew that they acted arrogantly toward them, and made a name for Yourself as *it is* this day. You divided the sea before them, so they passed through the midst of the sea on dry ground; and their pursuers You hurled into the depths, like a stone into raging waters. And with a pillar of cloud You led them by day, and with a pillar of fire by night to light for them the way in which they were to go. Then You came down on Mount Sinai, and spoke with them from heaven; You gave them just ordinances and true laws, good statutes and commandments. **So You made known to them Your holy sabbath, and laid down for them commandments, statutes and law, through Your servant Moses**” (Nehemiah 9:6-14).

Not too many resources focus attention on the mentioning of the Sabbath instruction in Nehemiah 9:14. The gracious acts of God in history toward Israel, tend to instead be what commentators focus on, perhaps mentioning the value of the Torah, more generally, as a gift from God to His people—not as some kind of unnecessary burden or heavy yoke of bondage for them to be subjected to. Mark A. Throntveit offers the summarization,

“The first half of the confession (vv. 6-15) sings with one voice the glorious melody of God’s gracious activity on Israel’s behalf. Every verse of every section adds another

¹ If necessary, do consult the entry for the Book of Ezra-Nehemiah, appearing in the workbook *A Survey of the Tanach for the Practical Messianic*.

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demonstration of God's unmerited favor toward God's people. The Creator's purpose moves towards Abraham's election and issues in a covenant that promises the gift of the land. The Promisemaker proves to be worthy of the name Deliverer as God redeems Israel from the bondage of slavery in Egypt, thereby displaying divine commitment to the promise. But the Red Sea opens into the wilderness, not the land of promise. Thus, God's grace is seen in acts of nurture, guidance, and preservation as God leads the people forth toward the fulfillment of the promise, all with nary a word of obligation. As if to emphasize this aspect, even the momentous giving of the Law on Mount Sinai (vv. 13-14) is related out of chronological order as one of God's gracious acts of provision. Throughout these verses God is the sole subject of verbs that speak only of gift, grace, and generosity."²

There do tend to be a few, brief observations made on the Sabbath and its importance, among commentators. Mervin Breneman notes, "The Sabbath is mentioned here in a context of grace (cf. 10:31; 15:15-22)."³ Judah J. Slotki makes the assertion, "It is singled out for special mention because of its fundamental importance in the religious life of Israel,"⁴ further referencing statements in the Jerusalem Talmud about the importance of *Shabbat*, which do quote from Nehemiah 9:13-14, among other Tanach passages:

"And it is written, 'See! The Lord has given you the Sabbath, [therefore on the sixth day he gives you bread for two days]' (Ex. 16:29). In the prophets, it is written: 'But the House of Israel rebelled against me in the wilderness; they did not walk in my statutes [but rejected my ordinances, by whose observance man shall live;] and my Sabbaths they greatly profaned' (Ezek. 20:13). In the Writings, as it is written, 'Thou didst come down upon Mount Sinai, [and speak with them from heaven and give them right ordinances and true laws, good statutes and commandments,] and thou didst make known to them thy holy Sabbath' (Neh. 9:13-14). Said R. Eleazar b. R. Abinah, 'The word "commandments" [of the Sabbath] is written out fully, to tell you that it is weighed in the balance against all of the other commandments of the Torah. Yet circumcision overrides [the requirements of the Sabbath].' One may compare the matter to two women who were standing on steps, one above the other, so that you do not know which of them is taller than the other. If this one appears to be coming down the steps before her friend, you know that her friend is taller than she. The most stringent of all of them is the commandment concerning the prohibition of idolatry: 'But if you err, and do not observe all these commandments which the Lord has spoken to Moses, [. . . all the congregation shall offer one young bull for a burnt offering]' (Num. 15:22)" (y. *Nedarim* 38b).⁵

Given how violation of the seventh-day Sabbath was considered a major cause of the exile, properly keeping the Sabbath is an important part of the record of Nehemiah, as

² Mark A. Throntveit, *Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Ezra-Nehemiah* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1992), pp 104-105.

³ Mervin Breneman, *New American Commentary: Ezra-Nehemiah-Esther* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1993), 238.

⁴ Judah J. Slotki, *Soncino Books of the Bible: Daniel-Ezra-Nehemiah* (London: Soncino Press, 1951), 237.

⁵ *The Jerusalem Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*. PDF-compatible MS Windows and Mac OS. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2009. CD-ROM.

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witnessed further on (10:31-34; 13:14-22). In the estimation of Ralph W. Klein, "Only observance of the sabbath is mentioned as a specific ethical requirement, a typical exilic and post-exilic concern (10:13; 13:15-22; Isa 56:2, 4, 6), also highlighted in the survey of Israel's history in Ezekiel 20:12-13, 16, 20-21, 24."⁶ Recognizing how the seventh-day Sabbath is highlighted with such importance, in a widely salvation-historical narrative, Bible readers today need to certainly be committed to giving the Sabbath its proper due in their lives of obedience unto the Lord.

⁶ Ralph W. Klein, "The Books of Ezra & Nehemiah," in Leander E. Keck, ed., et. al., *New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 3:811.