

The First Example of Expository Preaching

“They read from the book, from the law of God, explaining and giving insight, and they provided understanding of the reading” (Nehemiah 8:8).

This text is the heart of a powerful passage in which the devout priest Ezra leads his Jerusalem congregation of returned exiles in the reading and explanation of some important passage from the Hebrew Torah. In the previous book which goes by the name of this great man, he is described as follows. “For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of Yahweh and to practice *it*, and to teach *His* statute and judgment in Israel.” (Ezra 7:10 LSB). He taught what he had first lived, and what he lived he had first learned from the Scriptures. He deliberately put study, conduct, and teaching in the right order. His study was saved from unreality, his conduct was rescued from uncertainty, and his teaching avoided insincerity and shallowness. So now in the Nehemiah passage we see Ezra actually doing what he had previously set his heart to, that is, to teach the Torah to his beloved “congregation” in the open air of Jerusalem.

But what did his assisting priests do with the Word that was read? In the original text quoted from Nehemiah 8:8, the key verb is the Hebrew word *parash* which means “explain” or “give understanding.” Here our translation differs from some versions which render the verb as “translate.” Thus this chapter has sometimes been viewed as an example of the Levites translating the Biblical Hebrew into the popular Aramaic language so the common people could understand the meaning. There is reason to question, however, the idea that these Levites were translating. That is because another verb that occurs in the “sister” book to Nehemiah. In Ezra 4:7 the verb for “translate” is *tirgem* and it appears there to refer to a letter translated from Aramaic into Persian. The prominent later word “Targum” refers to the translation of the Hebrew Bible into Aramaic and is derived from that verb.

It should also be noted that the two ancient translations of the Hebrew Bible, the Septuagint and the Vulgate, also render the verb as “explain” and not as “translate.” They understood the difference between translation and explanation. There is also a note in the NET Bible defending the words as describing an explanation, not a translation.

So what does this dramatic scene set inside the “Watergate” of ancient Jerusalem (Nehemiah 8:1) convey to us about the ministry of preaching in our modern “church world?”

This vivid drama in Nehemiah 8 is a beautiful example of Biblical texts being publicly read and then carefully explained to the eager hearers. There are examples of the public reading of the Torah in earlier Biblical texts such as Exodus 24, Deuteronomy 32, and Joshua 24. This event, however, is the first clear example of a Torah reading accompanied by an explanation. Thus it appears to be the first example in the Bible of what today we call “expository preaching.”

Dear ministers of the Word, we do not have to be modern incarnations of a Charles Spurgeon or a Martyn Lloyd-Jones. We do not know how powerful were the locutionary skills of Ezra, but rather it appears to me that the sense of the passage in Nehemiah was not about his amazing elocution but his faithful exposition. May we like Ezra faithfully teach his statutes and judgments in our modern “Jerusalems.”

William Varner
The Master’s University/Grace Baptist Church
Santa Clarita, CA