

THE NETHINIMS

Jon Macon

An interesting group of people that we read about in the Old Testament is called the “Nethinims.” “Nethinims” always appears in the plural (and always with the article, the Hebrew equivalent of the English word “*the*”) and means “*the given ones.*” There is more information about the Nethinims in Ezra and Nehemiah than in any other books of the Bible. In fact, the only reference to these people found elsewhere is in 1 Chronicles 9:2, which says, “Now the first inhabitants that dwelt in their possessions in their cities were, the Israelites, the priests, Levites, and the Nethinims.” “Nethinims” appears a total of 17 times in Ezra and Nehemiah combined.

The origin of the Nethinims

We do not know the exact origin of the Nethinims, but it appears that they were of foreign origin. First of all, the individual names of the Nethinims are typically un-Hebrew names (see Ezra 2:43-54 and Nehemiah 7:46-56). Furthermore, the Nethinims lived and worked together as a separate group, emphasized by their being consistently referred to as *the* Nethinims. This was the general pattern for foreigners who were incorporated into the Israelite nation. For example, Moses’ father-in-law, Jethro, was not a Hebrew, but was a priest of Midian (Exod 3:1; 4:18; 18:1-27). His descendants were referred to as Kenites (Judg 1:16). They joined with Moses and the Israelites in the wilderness and dwelt among the children of Judah (Num 10:29-32; Judg 1:16; 4:17). The Kenites, including the Rechabites, continued to dwell among the children of Judah as a distinct group for at least 800 years, and were noted for their faithfulness to Jehovah (Judg 4:11; 1 Sam 16:6; 1 Chr 2:55; 2 Kgs 10:15-28; Jer 35). Another group, the Gibeonites, deceived Joshua and the elders of Israel, and were brought in among the Israelites as a protected people (Josh 9). However, they were cursed and made bondmen, with the specific job of hewing wood and drawing water for the house of God (Josh 9:23). They were still a distinct group of people in Israel in the time of King David, who avenged them after Saul had broken the covenant (2 Sam 21:1-9). The Nethinims are usually listed as a group just prior to the descendants of Solomon’s servants (Ezra 2:43-58; Neh 7:46-60; 11:3). David appointed them for the service of the Levites (Ezra 8:20), and some speculate that

THE NETHINIMS

(continued)

since their jobs pertained to the house of the Lord, like the Gibeonites, perhaps they were actually the descendants of the Gibeonites. That is a possibility, but the bottom line is that we do not know the exact origin of the Nethinims. Yet the information we do have points away from the Nethinims being descendants of Jacob.

The role of the Nethinims

The Nethinims had very important jobs in the service of the temple. When God gave the Old Covenant to Israel by Moses, the law authorized only Aaron and his descendants to serve as priests (Exod 28-29). Exodus 40:13-15 says, “And thou shalt put upon Aaron the holy garments, and anoint him, and sanctify him; that he may minister unto me in the priest’s office. And thou shalt bring his sons, and clothe them with coats: and thou shalt anoint them, as thou didst anoint their father, that they may minister unto me in the priest’s office: *for their anointing shall surely be an everlasting priesthood throughout their generations.*” The rest of the tribe of Levi was separated by God for the service of the tabernacle under the priests (Num 8:5-26). Numbers 3:5-7 says, “And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying, Bring the tribe of Levi near, and present them before Aaron the priest, that they may minister unto him. *And they shall keep his charge, and the charge of the whole congregation before the tabernacle of the congregation, to do the service of the tabernacle*” (see also verses 8-13 for further details). Ezra 8:20 says, “Also of the Nethinims, *whom David and the princes had appointed for the service of the Levites*, two hundred and twenty Nethinims: all of them were expressed by name.” Thus, in this God-ordained hierarchy for the service of the house of the Lord, the Levites helped the priests, and the Nethinims helped the Levites. This would indicate that the Nethinims performed tasks that may have been lowly in nature but were certainly necessary, although we do not know their specific duties. The importance of the Nethinims in the immediate post-exilic period is demonstrated by their number: several hundred returned with Zerubbabel (Ezra 2:58; Neh 7:60), and 220 returned with Ezra (Ezra 8:20). King Artaxerxes also exempted them from paying taxes and duties along with the priests and the Levites (Ezra 7:24). They came to reside in their own guild in Ophel, opposite the Water-gate in Jerusalem (Neh 3:26,31; 11:21).