

Ezra/Nehemiah
Community Presbyterian Church
Lesson Six
Understanding the Sukkah

1. The whole community that returned from captivity made booths, and dwelt in the booths- the Israelites had not done so from the days of Joshua the son of Nun to that day. And there was very great gladness.

Nehemiah 8:17

2. Now, is it possible that King David came and the Jews in his time and all subsequent generations did not make sukkot, until Ezra came? The reference to Joshua in the Nehemiah verse reflects the dedication of the Land of Israel to God as holy by Joshua. This dedication ceased to be in effect when the Babylonians destroyed the First Temple. Now through the efforts of Ezra and Nehemiah the land was once again dedicated to God.

Babylonian Talmud Masechet Arachin 32b

3. The holiness of the land endured even after the destruction of the Temple. The change expressed in the Nehemiah verse, is that during the first Temple period the people regularly gave in to the temptation to engage in idolatry. But by the Second Temple period this problem had disappeared. The description of Ezra and his followers dwelling in Sukkot should be understood as metaphoric language expressing that they remained loyal to the One God of Israel. They did not serve other gods, as did the previous generations.

Babylonian Talmud Masechet Arachin 32b

4. In the Nehemiah verse Joshua's name is spelled without a "hey." It is rendered Yeishua rather than the typical spelling Yehoshua. The removal of the "hey" in this context is to express Joshua's lack of full devotion to God in that he allowed idolatry to continue to exist in the land. The letter "hey" is one of the four letters in the Divine name. Its inclusion in a person's name often expresses that person's deep devotion to God.

Babylonian Talmud Masechet Arachin 32b

5. Even if booths were erected at the festival before Ezra's time, they were merely part of the harvest aspect of the festival. ...Now, however, the significance of the booths in terms of Israel's history were introduced. For the first time in centuries, they were erected in Jerusalem as a reminder of the wilderness wanderings.

H.G.H. Williamson

6. If, therefore, we are to look for any historical innovation, it is not in the celebration of the festival itself, which already was well established or even in the dwelling in booths implied in the very name of the festival but in the use of the species to construct and cover the *sukkah*.

Joseph Blenkinsopp

Step One: Before Nehemiah nobody in the Bible actually built a Sukkah.

7. After the ingathering from your threshing floor and your vat, you shall hold the Feast of Booths for seven days. You shall rejoice in your festival your son and your daughter, your male and your female slaves, the Levite, the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow in your communities. You shall hold the festival for the Eternal your God in the place that the Eternal will choose (Jerusalem); for the Eternal your God will bless all your crops and all your undertakings and you shall have nothing but joy.

Deuteronomy 16:13-15

8. This man (Elkanah) used to go up on his festival pilgrimage from his town every year to worship and to offer sacrifice to the Eternal of Hosts at Shiloh.—Hophni and Phinehas, the two sons of Eli, were priests of the Eternal there.

I Samuel 1:3

Step Two: The Bible stresses the connections between the Temple and Sukkot.

9. Then Solomon convoked the elders of Israel - all the heads of the tribes and the ancestral chieftains of the Israelites - before King Solomon in Jerusalem, to bring up the Ark of the Covenant of the Eternal from the city of David, that is Zion. All the men of Israel gathered before King Solomon at the Feast [of Booths] in the month Ethanim - that is the seventh month.

I Kings 8:1-2

10. They rededicated the Temple on the twenty-fifth day of the month of Kislev, the same day of the same month on which the Temple had been desecrated by the Gentiles. The happy celebration lasted eight days, like the Festival of Booths, and the people remembered how only a short time before, they had spent the Festival of Booths wandering like wild animals in the mountains and living in caves. But now, carrying green palm branches and sticks decorated with ivy, they paraded around, singing grateful praises to Him who had brought about the purification of His own Temple. Everyone agreed that the entire Jewish nation should celebrate this festival each year.

II Maccabees 10:5-8

Step Three: The meaning of living in booths in the wilderness.

11. You shall live in booths seven days; all the citizens in Israel shall live in booths; in order that future generations may know that I made the Israelite people live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt, I am The Eternal your God.

Leviticus 23:42-43