

RENEWAL AND WORSHIP

KEY VERSE: *"Thou, even thou, art LORD alone; thou hast made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth, and all things that are therein, the seas, and all that is therein, and thou preservest them all; and the host of heaven worshippeth thee."*—Nehemiah 9:6

SELECTED SCRIPTURE: *Nehemiah 8:13-9:3*

AFTER THE OVERTHROW of Judah's last king, Zedekiah, the children of Israel were taken captive and exiled to Babylon. There they remained in captivity for seventy years. During that long period of time God continued to care for his favored people although they had been disobedient to his laws, and were made to suffer the consequences. The Word of God records the experiences that the Israelites had when it was time for them to return from exile. Together they began to rebuild Jerusalem

Ezra and Nehemiah were the two principal servants who were especially used by God to provide us with this information.

The Jewish people were set aside by God as a distinct race, and for a special purpose, but after seventy years of living in a foreign land there was the tendency among some to become complacent in their captive surroundings. There were those who preferred to remain in Babylon, having made profitable and comfortable lives for themselves there. When the return from exile became an accomplished fact there was a need to rebuild

their identity spiritually as well as materially. It was one thing to rebuild their capital city Jerusalem, its walls and temple, but they also must remember their unique history as a peculiar people, and bring an end to the practice of mixed marriages which had become common as exiles.

Ezra played an important role in teaching the Law to the returning children of Israel. As all the people gathered together, "Ezra the priest brought the Law before the congregation both of men and women, and all that could hear with understanding, upon the first day of the seventh month."—Neh. 8:2

The Israelites had a religious new year that occurred in the springtime, as well as a civil new year occurring six months later in the autumn. This was an integral part of their Sabbath system which was based on the number seven, and multiples of seven.

These Sabbath celebrations were special holy days, whether they happened every seventh day, or year, or in the case of their civil new year, at the beginning of the seventh month. They were important and long established features of their Law

The celebration of the civil new year was called the Feast of Tabernacles, or Booths. In past years the Jews were well acquainted with this event as given by Moses in their Law. Now they had forgotten it, so Ezra met with the priests and chief elders among the Jews, and endeavored to teach the people concerning this special occasion. "They found written in the Law which the LORD had commanded by Moses, that the children of Israel should dwell in booths in the feast of the seventh month."—vs.14

The Israelites were commanded to reside in 'booths' which were temporary dwelling places, which served to remind them of their freedom from bondage and their sojourn in the wilderness. it was a time of great rejoicing and ingathering of their crops, which, in a grand way, typified the coming kingdom when the ingathering fruitage of the spirit will restore mankind back to God's image again.

That will be a time of great rejoicing and blessing for the whole world of mankind, and thus will be fulfilled the meaning of this feast