

Royal Arch History.

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There is no part of sacred history, except perhaps the account of the construction of the Temple, which should be more interesting to the advanced mason than that which relates to the destruction of Jerusalem, the captivity of the Jews at Babylon, and the subsequent restoration under Cyrus for the purpose of rebuilding "the house of the Lord". Intimately connected, as the events which are commemorated in this period are, with the organisation of the Royal Arch degree, it is impossible that any mason that has been exalted to that degree, can thoroughly understand the nature and bearing of the secrets with which he has been entrusted, unless he shall have devoted some portion of time to the study of the historical incidents to which these secrets refer.

The History of the Jewish People from the death of Solomon to the final destruction of the temple was one continued series of civil dissensions among themselves, and of revolts in government and apostasies in religion. No sooner had Rehoboam, the son and successor of Solomon, ascended the throne, than his harsh and tyrannical conduct so incensed the people that ten of the tribes revolted from his authority, and placing themselves under the government of Jeroboam, the son of Neb at, formed the separate kingdom of Israel, while Rehoboam continued to rule over the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, which henceforth constituted the kingdom of Israel, whose capital remained at Jerusalem. From thenceforward the history of Palestine becomes two-fold. The ten revolting tribes which constituted the Israelitish monarchy, soon formed a schismatic religion, which eventually terminated in idolatry, and caused their final ruin and dispersion. But the two remaining tribes proved hardly more faithful to the God of their fathers, and carried their idolatry to such an extent, that at length there was scarcely a town in all Judea that did not have its tutelary deity borrowed from the gods of its pagan neighbours. Even in Jerusalem, the "holy city," the prophet Jeremiah tells us that altars were set up to Baal. Israel was the first to receive its punishment for this career of wickedness, and the ten tribes were carried into captivity from which they never returned. As a nation, they have been stricken from the roll of history.

The destruction of the ten tribes by no means impeded the progress of the other two towards idolatry and licentiousness, Judah and Benjamin, however, were never without a line of prophets, priests and holy men, whose teachings and exhortations sometimes brought the apostate Jews back to their first allegiance, and for a brief period restored the belief in one God the Creator.

Among these bright but transitory intervals of regeneration, we read of the pious reign of the good King Josiah, during which the altars of idolatry throughout his kingdom were destroyed, the temple was repaired, and its regular services were restored. It was in the prosecution of this laudable duty, that a copy of the Book of the Law, which had long been lost, was found in a crypt of the temple, and after having been publicly read to the priests, the levites and the people, it was again, by the direction of the prophetess Huldah, deposited in a secret place.

But not withstanding this fortuitous discovery of the Book of the Law, and not withstanding all the efforts of King Josiah to re-establish the worship of his fathers, the Jews were so attached to the practices of idolatry, that upon his death, being encouraged by his son and successor Jehoahaz, who was an impious monarch, they speedily returned to the adoration of pagan deities and the observance of pagan rites.

The forbearance of God was at last exhausted, and in the reign of this King Jehoahaz, the series of divine punishments commenced, which only terminated in the destruction of Jerusalem and the captivity of its inhabitants.

The instrument selected by the Deity for carrying out his designs in the chastisement of the idolatrous Jews was Nebuchadnezzar, king of the Chaldees, then reigning at Babylon: this monarch, and the country which

he governed, played an important part in the series of events which are connected with the organisation of the Royal Arch degree.

Nebuchadnezzar was a warlike monarch, and during his reign was engaged in many contests for the increase of his power and the extension of his dominions. Among other nations who fell under his victorious arms, was Judea, whose King Jehoahaz, or as he was afterwards named Jehoiakim, was compelled to purchase peace by paying an annual tribute to his conquerors. Jehoiakim was subsequently slain by Nebuchadnezzar, and his son Jehoiachin ascended the throne of Israel. The oppression of the Babylonians still continued, and after a reign of three months, Jehoiachin was deposed by the King of the Chaldees, and his kingdom given to his uncle, Zedekiah, a monarch who is characterised by Josephus as "a despiser of justice and his duty."

It was in the reign of this ungodly sovereign that the incidents took place which are commemorated in the first part of the Royal Arch degree. Having repeatedly rebelled against the authority of the Babylonian King, to whose appointment he was indebted for his throne, Nebuchadnezzar took his army to Judea, and laid siege to Jerusalem, and after a severe struggle of eighteen months duration, captured it in 297 BC, followed 11 years later by its complete devastation. Of the people- he slew the young men with the sword and had no compassion on young man or maiden, old man or him that stooped with age, and those that escaped the sword were carried away captive to Babylon. All the inhabitants of Jerusalem were not carried away captive however, it has been suggested that Nebuchadnezzar carried away only the principal inhabitants, the warriors and artisans of every kind (which would, of course, include the masons), approximately 20,000 in all. He left behind the husbandmen, the labourers, and, in general, the poorer classes that constituted the great body of the people. Among the prisoners of distinction, Josephus mentions the high priest, Seraiah, and Zephaniah, the priest that was next to him, with the three rulers that guarded the temple, the eunuch that was over the armed men, seven friends of Zedekiah, his scribe and sixty other rulers. The captives may have had a certain amount of freedom when they reached Babylon but they certainly didn't on their forced march to that city. Masonic tradition informs us that the captive Jews were bound by their conquerors with triangular chains, and that this was done by the Chaldeans as an additional insult, because the Jewish masons were known to esteem the triangle as an emblem of the sacred name of God, and must have regarded its appropriation as a desecration of the Tetragrammaton.

When they reached Riblah, about 350km north-east of Jerusalem, Nebuchadnezzar commanded that Seraiah the high priest, and the rulers, to the amount of seventy, be put to death. They then continued their march to Babylon. You can imagine how these captives were feeling, their families decimated, their homes destroyed, all hope gone and being dragged to an uncertain future. Eventually they arrived at their destination—Babylon.

Babylon must have been an amazing sight for the struggling mass of deportees at the end of their 1600km forced march from Jerusalem. Approaching from the north along a bank of the Euphrates, they were led up a heavily fortified main road between high walls shimmering with blue glaze. (The famous blue tiles). Before them towered the massive Ishtar Gate. Through its bronze doors spread the fabled city of temples and gardens, topped by the Platform of Heaven and Earth, a seven-step 90m high ziggurat or terraced temple tower, inspiring the legend of the biblical tower of Babel. Babylon's importance derived from its location on fertile land at the confluence of major trade routes. Its riverfront bustled with shipping and the warehouses and temple granaries were filled with barley and wool. Groups of workmen toiled constantly to clear silt and reeds from irrigation channels linking the mighty rivers Euphrates and Tigris. Upstream, an artificial reservoir with a 64km perimeter ensured the city's water supply.

Notwithstanding the ignominious mode of their conveyance from Jerusalem, and the vindictiveness displayed by their conqueror in the destruction of their city and temple, they do not appear, on their arrival at Babylon, to have been subjected to any of the extreme rigours of slavery. They were distributed into various parts of the empire; some remaining in the city, while others were sent into the provinces. The latter probably distributed themselves to agricultural pursuits, while the former were engaged in commerce or in the labours of architecture. Anderson says, that Nebuchadnezzar, having applied himself to the design of finishing his buildings at Babylon, engaged therein all the able artists of Judea and other captives to join his own Chaldean Masons. They were permitted to retain their personal property, and even to purchase lands and erect houses. Their civil and religious government was not utterly destroyed, for they retained a regular succession of kings and high priests, one of each of whom returned with them, as will be seen hereafter, on

their restoration. Some of the principal captives were advanced to offices of dignity and power in the royal palace, and were permitted to share in the councils of state. Their prophets of state, Daniel—(Daniel of course is the same Daniel as "Daniel in the lions den". He was captured and deported in 606BC. That is when the 70 years of captivity as foretold by the prophet Jeremiah commenced) - Daniel and Ezekiel, with their associates, preserved among their countrymen the pure doctrines of their religion, and taught that belief in the Divine Being which constituted the most important principle in Primitive Freemasonry, in opposition to the spurious system practised by their idolatrous conquerors. The people who adhered to the worship of God, and they were neither few nor insignificant, continued to meet in their schools, or lodges, for the undisturbed practice of their system of ethical Freemasonry, which they did not fail to propagate for their mutual consolation during this calamitous reverse of fortune and for the benefits of their descendants. We find in the Bible that Jeremiah counselled the Jewish people to:

"Build ye houses and dwell in them; and plant ye gardens and eat the fruit of them; take ye wives and beget sons and daughters; and take wives for your sons, and give your daughters to husbands, that they may beget sons and daughters; that you may be increased there and not diminished ... and seek the peace of the city whither I have caused you to be carried away captive ... "

However a lot of the Jewish captives never forgot their native country as we find in Psalm 137;
"By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept when we remembered Zion. We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof For there they that carried us away captive required of us a song; and they that wasted us required of us mirth, saying- Sing us one of the songs of Zion. How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land. If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning. If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth; If I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy. "

Their captivity continued until Babylon was captured by Cyrus, King of Persia in 538 BC. The King then issued the following proclamation;

"Thus saith Cyrus, King of Persia. All the Kingdoms of the earth hath the Lord God in heaven given me; and He hath charged me to build Him an house in Jerusalem which is in Judah. Who is there among of all His people? The Lord his God be with him and let him go up. "

At the same time he restored to them all the sacred vessels and precious ornaments of the first temple, which had been carried away by Nebuchadnezzar, and which were still in existence.

Because of the vastness of Cyrus' empire or rather those portions in which the Hebrews had been settled, through which the decree of Cyrus had to be made known, at least twelve months must be allowed for dissemination of the news and the necessary preparations for the return. It could not therefore have been until 536 B.C. that the first return of the Jews from exile took place.

It is understandable that fifty years after the last deportation not everyone would take advantage of this permission to return to the land of their fathers. In any case it was a risky business to leave the wealthy country of Babylon, where they had established themselves and where most of them had grown up, and set out on the difficult road back to the ruins of a ravaged land. Despite this, after a long preparation a caravan led by Sheshbazzar, (a Prince of the House of David) set out on the trail towards the homeland. The Old Testament gives no information about the size of the returning group but it is thought to have been about 20,000 neither do we have any information about the difficulties they experienced on their trek. As you can imagine, to provision and house such a party for approximately four months in a strange and sometimes hostile and desert land would be huge undertaking. Eventually the caravan arrived in the ruins of Jerusalem. They found the Temple still standing but in very poor condition. The altar was still in place and the people had continued to make sacrifices. The workers on the land were too poor trying to eke out a subsistence while those with a little wealth had become accustomed to worshipping in the dilapidated Temple. The laying of the foundations was accompanied by great shouts of praise to the Lord. The priests blew their trumpets and the Levites sounded their cymbals. The noise of rejoicing was so great that the people of the surrounding countryside came and saw that the work had begun on the rebuilding. They asked for permission to join in the work. Their offer was spurned on the basis that Cyrus had restricted the work to the returning exiles. Thus rejected the neighbours became enemies and by various means the work was brought to a standstill. As Haggai stated, the time had not come that the Lord's House should be built. The people were

far too preoccupied with their own troubles. Increasing the difficulties for the people there was a serious drought and the harvests had failed.

So despite Cyrus' support, the first return in 536 BC was an abject failure.

In 522 BC Darius became king of Babylon and there is an account that after a evening of feasting and entertaining the commanders and governors from throughout his empire Darius retired to his bed. He woke shortly afterwards and started talking to his three bodyguards. He posed a question to each and promised as a prize "to him who should give the truest and most intelligent speech" purple garments to wear, gold cups to drink from, a gold bed to sleep on, plus much more. The three questions were: was wine the strongest thing; were kings the most powerful; or whether truth was strongest of all.

The first two guards discoursed at length on the first two topics then it was the turn of the third man who had added women to his theme. The third speaker was Zerubbabel who concluded that women are the mightiest in the world but Truth prevails over all. The king was so impressed with this response that he "directed him to ask for something beyond what he himself had promised." Zerubbabel reminded the king of what he had promised to do if he obtained the throne. This was to rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple of God there. The king was pleased with Zerubbabel's answer. The king then wrote to all his governors ordering them to escort Zerubbabel and those who were to go with him to build the Temple. He also wrote to the rulers of Syria and Phoenicia ordering them to cut cedar from Lebanon and send it down to Jerusalem and to assist him to rebuild the city. He also decreed that all those captives returning to Judaea should be free.

Zerubbabel worked with Jeshua the son of Jehozadak the high priest, as joint leaders of the second assemblage to return to Jerusalem in 520 BC

According to the Book of Ezra 2: 64-67

"The whole congregation was forty-two thousand three hundred and sixty Jews plus seven thousand three hundred and thirty seven servants and maids including two hundred singing men and singing women. There were seven hundred and thirty six horses, two hundred and forty five mules, four hundred and thirty five camels, six thousand seven hundred and twenty asses."

It requires no great imagination to picture the long procession with its priests and singers, its porters, its women and children making its way up river by the banks of the mighty Euphrates.

On arrival at Jerusalem the returnees built fine homes for themselves and Haggai the Prophet berated the people for dwelling in their fine homes while the House of the Lord lay waste. Then Zerubbabel and Jeshua obeyed the voice of the Lord and with the "remnant of the people" came and worked on the Temple of God.

No sooner had the work of restoration commenced than Tattenai, governor of the territory to the west of the Jordan, enquired of them, what right did they have to rebuild the Temple and make the wall. He then wrote to Darius seeking direction as to what he should do. Tattenai made no attempt to stop the repair work but sought to clarify the legality of it. Darius wrote in reply stating that they had searched the royal records and had found the original decree of Cyrus and that he, Darius, directed, that the restoration be done "with speed". Darius instructed Tattenai and the other governors in Syria and Phoenicia not to interfere with the work. Indeed he directed them to provide Zerubbabel with bulls, rams and lambs as well as wheat, salt, wine and oil on a regular basis. Darius then uttered a threat that if anyone were to disobey or reject his orders a beam was to be taken down from his house and that he be hanged from it and his estate would be forfeited to the king.

If the people of Jerusalem had any notion of taking things more easily and slowly now that they had the full support of Darius they were mistaken. The Prophet Haggai had always been a source of great encouragement to the people. The Prophet Zechariah who was with Haggai in Jerusalem was also a source of strength with his visions intended to encourage the Israelites to complete the Temple. After a great deal of urging by the Prophet Haggai the "Second House of God" was finally completed and duly dedicated in 516 BC.

Thus Israel again had a religious centre where the traditions of King Solomon's Temple could be revived. But it was not a question of returning to the past. The Temple was a modest replacement for its predecessor and no longer the centre of Jewish worship. Israel was no longer an independent nation and the

reconstruction of the Temple was only accomplished with major support and contributions from the Persian monarchy and prayers were offered up to them.

To conclude I quote:

"On the Southern slopes of a long range of hills, there still stands among the rough grass of the highlands, some 50km from Shiraz, in Southern Iran (Persia), a small unpretentious building. This is built in the form of a stone pavilion, where the body of Cyrus was laid to rest, after his death in 530 BC".

Above the entrance to the small chamber could at one time be read the following inscription:

*"O man, whoever you are and whenever you come, For I know you will come.
I am Cyrus, who gave the Persians their Empire.
Do not grudge me this patch of earth that covers my body ... "*

References:-

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