

LECTURE THREE

THE RETURN TO JERUSALEM

"For lo, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will bring again the captivity of my people Israel and Judah, saith the Lord; and I will cause to return to the land that I gave to their fathers, and they shall possess it." Jeremiah xxx3

We have now arrived at that portion of history of the Babylonish captivity which is allegorised in the concluding ceremonies of the Royal Arch degree. And here we may incidentally observe, that the same analogy which exists in the Master's degree to the ancient mysteries, is also to be found in the Royal Arch. The Masonic scholar, who is familiar with the construction of these mysteries of the Pagan priests and philosopher, is well aware that they inculcate by symbolic and allegoric instruction, the great lessons in the resurrection of the body and the immortality of the soul. Hence they were all funereal in their character. They commenced in sorrow, they terminated in joy. The death or destruction of some eminent personage, most generally a god, was depicted in the beginnings of the ceremonies of initiation, while the close was occupied in illustrating, in the same manner, the discovery of his grave, the recovery of the body, and the restoration of life eternal. The same religious instruction is taught in the Master's degree. The evidenced of this fact, it is unnecessary for us here to demonstrate. It will be at once apparent to every mason who is sufficiently acquainted with the ritual of his order.

But is it not equally apparent that the same system, though under a thicker veil, is preserved in the ceremonies of the Royal Arch? There is a resurrection of that which has been buried---a discovery of that which had been lost---an exchange of that which, like the soul, is intended to be permanent. The life which we pass on earth is but a substitute for that glorious one which we are to spend in eternity. And it is in the grave, in the depths of the earth, that the corruptible puts on incorruption, that the mortal puts on immortality,* and that the substitute of this temporal life is exchanged for the blessed reality of life eternal.

The interval to which we alluded in the last lecture, and which is occupied by the captivity of the Jews at Babylon, is now over, and the allegory of the Royal Arch is resumed with the restoration of the captives to their home.

Five hundred and thirty-six years before the Christian era, Cyrus issued his decree for the return of the Jews. 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.

* 1 Corinth xv. 53

Forty-two thousand three hundred and sixty of the Jews repaired, in the same year, from Babylon and the neighbouring cities to Jerusalem. The leaders of these were Zerubbabel, Joshua and Haggai, of whom, as they perform an important part in the history of this event as recorded in the Royal Arch, it is incumbent on us to speak more particularly.* Zerubbabel was, at the time of the restoration, the possessor of the regal authority among the Jews, as the prince of the captivity and a descendent of the house of David, and as such he assumed at Jerusalem the office of King. He was the son of Shealtiel, who was the son of Jehoiachin, the monarch who had been deposed by Nebuchadnezzar and carried away to Babylon. He was the intimate friend of Cyrus, and indeed, it is

supposed that it was principally through his influence that the Persian monarch was induced to decree the liberation of the captives.

Joshua, the High Priest, was, like Zerubbabel, entitled to his office by the indisputable claim of direct descent from the ancient hierarchy. He was the son of Josedech, and the grandson of Seraiah, who had been the High Priest when Jerusalem was taken by Nebuchadnezzar.

Of Haggai, the Scribe, but little is known that can be relied on. We know nothing of the place or the time of his birth, but it is supposed that he was born at Babylon during the captivity. He was the first of the three prophets who flourished after the captivity, and his writings, though few, (so few, indeed, that some theologians have supposed that the larger portion of them has perished,) all relate to the building of the second temple. The office of scribe, which is the one assigned to him in the Royal Arch degree, was one of great importance in the Jewish economy. The sophors or scribes constituted, says Dr. Beard, ** a learned, organised, much esteemed and highly influential body of men, recognised and supported by the state. They were learned in the laws, and it was their duty to expound them to the people. Horne*** says that the scribe seems to have been the king's secretary of state, and as such to have registered all acts and decrees. It is, perhaps, in this capacity that we are to suppose that Haggai claims a place in the Grand Council of the Royal Arch.

Zerubbabel, assisted by these advisers, proceeded to arrange his followers in such a form as would enable them most safely and expeditiously to traverse the long and dangerous road from Babylon to Jerusalem, which latter place they reached after a journey of four months, on the 22nd of June, 535 years before the birth of Christ.

The first object of the Jewish leader was, we may well suppose, to provide the means of shelter for the people who accompanied him. We are irresistibly led to the conclusion that for this purpose it was found necessary to erect tents for their temporary dwelling. Extensive and populous as was Jerusalem at the commencement of the captivity, after the ruthless devastation of its unsparing conqueror it could hardly have retained sufficient means for the convenient accommodation for the fifty thousand souls who were thus suddenly and unexpectedly brought within its walls. Tents, therefore, afforded rude and temporary dwellings, until, in the course of time, more substantial buildings could be erected.

* In the English ritual of the Royal Arch, Ezra and Nehemiah are added to the number of scribes. ** In Kitto's Cyclop. Of Bib. Literat. Art. Scribe. *** Introduction to Crit. Stud. And Knowl. Of Script. Vol iii p. 98.

The next thing was to restore the ancient sacrifices and religious services, and for this purpose to provide a temporary place of worship until the second temple could be completed. Accordingly, a few months after their arrival, they met together at Jerusalem and celebrated the Feast of Trumpets, and a few days subsequently, the Feast of Tabernacles. It was probably the celebration of this latter observance, as well as the necessity and expediency of the measure, that led the Grand Council of leaders to the erection of a temporary tabernacle near the ruins of the ancient temple, the existence of which is so familiar to us from the traditions and ceremonies of the Royal Arch.

Having thus furnished dwellings for the workmen, and a sacred edifice for the celebration of their religious rites, our Masonic traditions inform us that Joshua, the High Priest, Zerubbabel, the King, and Haggai the Scribe, daily sat in council, to devise plans for the workmen and to superintend the

construction of the new temple, which, like a phoenix, was to arise from the ashes of the former one.

It is this period of time in the history of second temple, that it is commemorated in the concluding portion of the Royal Arch. The ruins of the ancient temple are begun to be removed, and the foundations of the second are laid, Joshua, Zerubbabel and Haggai are sitting in daily council within the tabernacle; parties of Jews who had not left Babylon with the main body under Zerubbabel, are continually coming up to Jerusalem to assist in rebuilding the house of the Lord.

During this period of laborious activity a circumstance occurred, which is alluded to in the ritual of the Royal Arch. The Samaritans were desirous of assisting the Jews in the construction of the temple, but their propositions were at once rejected by Zerubbabel. To understand the cause of this refusal to receive their cooperation, we must for a moment advert to the history of this people.

The ten tribes who had revolted from Rehoboam, the son of Solomon, and who had chosen Jeroboam for their king, rapidly fell into idolatry, and having selected the town of Samaria for their metropolis, a complete separation was thus effected between the kingdoms of Judah and Israel. Subsequently, the Samaritans were conquered by the Assyrians under Shalmanezar, who carried the greater part of the inhabitants into captivity, and introduced colonies in their place from Babylon, Cuthah, Ava, Hamath and Sepharvaim. These colonists, who assumed the name of Samaritans, brought with them, of course, the idolatrous creed and practices of the region from which they had emigrated. The Samaritans, therefore at the time of the rebuilding of the second temple, were an idolatrous race,* and as such abhorrent to the Jews. Hence, when they asked permission to assist in the pious work of rebuilding the temple, Zerubbabel, with the rest of the leaders replied, "Ye have nothing to do with us to build a house unto our God; but we ourselves together will

build unto the Lord God of Israel, as King Cyrus, the king of Persia has commanded us.

** **Ezra, iv. 3. They were not, perhaps, altogether idolators, although idolatry was the predominant religion. The Rev. Dr. Davidson says of them: - "It appears that the people were a mixed race. The greater part of the Israelites had been carried away captive by the Assyrians, including the rich, the strong, and such as was able to bear arms. But the poor and the feeble had been left. The country had not been so entirely depopulated as to possess no Israelite whatever. The dregs of the populace, particularly those who appeared incapable of active service, were not taken away by the victors. With them, therefore, the heathen colonists became incorporated. But the latter were far more numerous than the former, and had all power in their own hands. The remnant of the Israelites was so inconsiderable and insignificant as not to affect, to any important extent, the opinions of the new inhabitants. As the people were a mixed race, their religion also assumed a mixed character. In it the worship of idols was associated with that of the true God. But apostasy from Jehovah was not universal" See the article Samaritans in Kitto's "Cyclopaedia of Biblical Literature."

Hence it was that, to avoid the possibility of those idolatrous Samaritans polluting the holy work by their cooperation, Zerubbabel found it necessary to demand of everyone who offered himself as an assistant in the undertaking, that he should give an accurate of his lineage, and prove himself to have been a descendant (which no Samaritan could be) of those faithful Giblemites who worked at the building of the first temple.

It was while the workmen were engaged in making the necessary excavations for laying the foundations, and while numbers continued to arrive at Jerusalem from Babylon, that three worn and weary sojourners, after plodding on foot over the rough and devious roads between the two cities, offered themselves to the Grand Council as willing participants in the labour of erection. Who these sojourners were, we have no historical means of discovering; but there is a Masonic tradition (entitled, perhaps, to but little weight) that they were Hananiah, Misael and Azariah, three holy men,

who are better known to general readers by their Chaldaic names of Shadrach, Mesheck and Abednego, as having been miraculously preserved from the fiery furnace of Nebuchadnezzar.

Their services were accepted, and from their diligent labours resulted that important discovery, the perpetuation and preservation of which constitutes the great end and design of the Royal Arch degree.

This ends the connection of the history of the restoration with that of the Royal Arch. The works were soon after suspended in consequence of difficulties thrown in the way by the Samaritans, and other circumstances occurred to prevent the final completion of the temple for many years subsequent to the important discovery to which we have just alluded. But these details go beyond the Royal Arch, and are to be found in the higher degrees of masonry, such as the Red Cross Knight and the Prince of Jerusalem.