

LECTURE ONE

THE DESTRUCTION OF THE TEMPLE

"They have cast fire into thy sanctuary, they have defiled by casting down the dwelling place of thy name on the ground". Psalm Lxxiv 7

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 who 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 apostacies 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 Nebat, 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 a captivity from which they never returned. As a nation, they have been stricken from the roll of history.

But this wholesome example was lost upon Judea. 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 bought the apostate Jews back to their first allegiance, and for a brief period restored the pure theism of the Mosiac dispensation.

Among these bright but evanescent intervals of regeneracy, we are to account 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 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: and as 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, it is necessary that we should here pause in the narrative in which we have been engaged, to take a brief view of the locality of Babylon, the seat of the captivity, and of the history of the Chaldee nation, whose leader was the conqueror of Judah. "Few countries of antiquity," says Heeren* "have so just a claim to the attention of the historian as Babylonia," The fertility of its soil, the wealth of its inhabitants, the splendour of its cities, the refinement of its society, continued to give it a pre-eminent renown through a succession of ages. It occupied a narrow strip of land, lying between the river Tigris on the east and the Euphrates on the west, and extending about five hundred and forty miles west of north. The early inhabitants were undoubtedly of the Shemitic race, deriving their existence from one common origin with the Hebrews, though it is still a question with the historian whether they originally came from India or from the peninsula of Arabia. They originally formed a part of the great Assyrian monarchy, but their early history having no connection with Royal Arch Masonry, may be passed over without further discussion. About six hundred and thirty years before the Christian era, Babylon, the chief city, was conquered by Nebuchadnezzar, the King of the Chaldeans, a nomadic race, who descending from their homes in the mountains of Taurus and Caucasus, between the Euxine and the Caspian seas, overwhelmed the countries of Southern Asia, and became masters of the Syrian and Babylonian empires.

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."

• Historical Researches into the Politics, Intercourse and Trade of the principal nations of antiquity. Volume 1.

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 repaired with an army to Judea, and laying siege to Jerusalem, after a severe struggle of eighteen months' duration, reduced it. He then caused the city to be levelled with the ground, the royal palace to be burned, the temple to be pillaged, and the captives to be carried to Babylon.

These events are symbolically detailed in the Royal Arch, and in allusion to them, the passage of the Book of Chronicles which records them, is appropriately read during the ceremonies of this part of the degree.

"Zedekiah was one-and-twenty years old when he began to reign, and reigned eleven years in Jerusalem. And he did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord his God, and humbled not himself before Jeremiah the prophet speaking from the mouth of the Lord. And he also rebelled against King Nebuchadnezzar, and stiffened his neck, and hardened his heart from turning unto the Lord God of Israel. Moreover, all the chief of the priests and the people transgressed very much after all the abominations of the heathen; and polluted the house of the Lord, which he had hallowed in Jerusalem, and the Lord God of their fathers sent to them by his messengers, because he had compassion on his people and on his dwelling place. But they mocked the messengers of God, and despised his words, and misused his prophets, until the wrath of the Lord arose against his people, till there was no remedy."

This preparatory clause announces the moral causes which led to the destruction of Jerusalem—the evil counsels and courses of Zedekiah,—his hardness of heart,—his wilful deafness to the denunciations of the Lord's prophet,—and his violation of all his promises of obedience to Nebuchadnezzar. But not to the King alone was confined this sinfulness of life.

The whole of the people, and even the priests, the very servants of the house of the Lord, were infected with the moral plague. They had abandoned the precepts and observances of their fathers, which were to have made them a peculiar people, and falling into the idolatries of their heathen neighbours, had desecrated the altars of Jehovah with the impure fire of strange gods. Message after message had been sent to them from that God who had properly designated himself as "long suffering and abundant in goodness"—but all was in vain. The threats and warnings of the prophets were heard with contempt, and the messengers of God were treated with contumely, and hence the fatal result which is detailed in the succeeding passages of Scripture read before the candidate.

"Therefore he brought upon them the King of the Chaldees, who slew their young men with the sword, in the house of their sanctuary, and had no compassion upon young man or maiden, old man or him that stooped for age: he gave them all unto his hand. And all the vessels of the house of God, great and small, and the treasures of the house of the Lord, and the treasures of the king and of his princes; all these he brought to Babylon.

But the King of the Chaldees was not content with the rich spoils of war that he had gained. It was not sufficient that the sacred vessels of the temple, made by order of King Solomon, and under the supervision of that "curious and cunning workman," who had "adorned and beautified the edifice" erected for the worship of Jehovah, should become the prey of an idolatrous monarch. The dark sins of the people and the king required a heavier penalty.

The very house of the Lord itself—that sacred building which had been erected on the "threshing floor of Oman the Jebusite" and which constituted the third Grand Offering of Masonry on the same sacred place, was to be burned to its foundations; the city which was consecrated by its presence was to be levelled to the ground; and its inhabitants were to be led into a long and painful captivity. Hence the tale of devastation proceeds as follows;

"And they burnt the house of God, and brake down the wall of Jerusalem, and burnt all the palaces thereof with fire; and destroyed all the goodly vessels thereof. And them that had escaped from the sword carried he away captive to Babylon; where they were servants to him and his sons unto the reign of the Kingdom of Persia."

These events took place in the year 588 before Christ. But we must not suppose this to have been the beginning of the "seventy years' captivity" foretold by the prophet Jeremiah.

That actually commenced eighteen years before, in the reign of Jehoiakim, when Daniel was among the captives. Counting from the destruction of Jerusalem under Zedekiah, which is the event recorded in the Royal Arch, to the termination of the captivity under Cyrus, we shall have but fifty two years, so that we may readily understand how there should be among the aged men assembled to see the foundations laid of the second temple, many who had beheld the splendour and magnificence of the first.

But though the city was destroyed, and the temple burnt, the deep foundations of the latter were not destroyed. The Ark of the Covenant, with the Book of the Law which it contained, was undoubtedly destroyed in the general conflagration, for we read no account of its having been carried to Babylon, but the wisdom and foresight of Solomon had made a provision four hundred and seventy years before, for the safe preservation of an exact image of that sacred chest.

Thus we terminate what may be called the first section of the Royal Arch degree. The sound of war has been upon the nation--the temple is overthrown--the city is become a desert--yet even in its desolation, magnificent in its ruins of palaces and stupendous edifices--and the people have been dragged in chains as captives to Babylon.