



PROVINCE OF ESSEX

SHORT TALK - THE ROYAL ARCH STORY AND THE CRYPT, OR VAULT, LEGEND

(1760 words - approximately 13 minutes)

The material sources have been researched and assessed by Rob Soames PGStB(RA). He has given attributions where appropriate and has indicated where his own opinions are being stated. Credit should be given to the author at any presentation.

Why is there a Royal Arch story about three master masons from Babylon who found something very like the ancient Hebrew Holy of Holies by chance when starting to dig the foundations of the second temple around 530 BCE (Before Common Era)? And who came up with this idea for the RA Ceremony?

We know about the return of the Jewish people from Babylon, and indeed, the opening lines of Cyrus' proclamation, which the Principal Sojourner makes in our ceremony, is extremely well documented in historical sources. The text is given in the first chapter of the Biblical book of Ezra, and you can easily read the whole story of the rebuilding of the temple, including lots of detail you will recognise from our ceremony, in Ezra and also the books of Nehemiah and Haggai (familiar names to us all, aren't they?). The Jewish historian Josephus, who died about 100CE, also records it (his sources are likely to have included Ezra and the others of course). However, I doubt many of you know that an original text of the proclamation on a baked clay cylinder was found in the ruins of ancient Babylon's main temple in 1879 and is in the British Museum, together with two other tablets which have extracts from it. More impressive still perhaps, is that recent research¹ has identified other copies from China; this suggests that the text was distributed throughout the Persian Empire, which at the time extended far into central Asia.

It has even been said that Cyrus' proclamation is the world's first human rights declaration. Not only does Cyrus promise that Jerusalem can be restored, but he also recognises the right to liberty and freedom of worship to a people who have a different background to himself. Companions, this is a heritage of which we can be proud to be a part.

But where did the idea of the hole in the ground for the Holy of Holies come from? Well, perhaps it isn't really a very big step of imagination, given the other circumstances. But it did have to happen and someone had to come up with it. History shows that people don't often come up with ideas out of nothing. Usually in the background there is some kind of real event or association of ideas

¹World Archaeology -Issue 43, October/November 2010, Page 8

Before I go any further, I ought to mention now that in two places in the Bible, in the Second Book of Kings, Chapter 22 and the Second Book of Chronicles Chapter 34, there is an account that about 30 years before the destruction of King Solomon's temple, in about the 620s BCE, the 'good' King Josiah of Judah decided to repair the Temple - this would have been Solomon's temple, then more than 300 years old. The repairers found the 'Book of the Law', which had been lost.

We don't have any account of what happened to it after the reign of Josiah, but we do know that in 586 BCE, after a two year siege by the Assyrians, Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed and those who survived were enslaved and forcibly removed to Babylon. Our story, of course takes place 70 years later. But did this story of the Book of the Law influence it? And, of course, isn't it likely that in the chaos of destruction in 586, those responsible for the temple would have tried to hide their most precious artefacts as best they could while they could? And if everything is crashing down around you in fire and destruction, what is more likely than that the strongpoint - the Holy of Holies - might survive in some form as a kind of shelter under the debris?

The discovery of the Vault, the Altar and the Sacred Scroll comes from what we always refer to as 'an ancient legend'. I'll leave you to decide for yourself how much of the 'legend' could be true history and how much is elaboration, or imagination.

Our source for the legend, in written form, goes back to about 400 CE, 1600 years ago, when a Byzantine scholar named Philostorgius, writing about the rebuilding of the temple, gave an account of the discovery of the vault. Quite a number of us have perhaps heard about Philostorgius, and if you have, you may also have heard of other ancient writings on the subject. There are some slightly different versions of the story in existence which makes it confusing. This talk reflects a little recent research which tries to make sense of it all.

Philostorgius's personal beliefs and agenda make him a controversial figure in history² but for our purposes we are on fairly sure ground. His actual text has not survived but nearly 500 years later a much more establishment figure, Photius³, who died in 891 CE, wrote an extensive precis of it, and we do have this.

According to Philostorgius, just before 360 CE the Roman Emperor, Julian⁴, ordered the local Jewish population to rebuild Jerusalem and its Temple. They willingly started on this and then there was a massive earthquake. After the earthquake, the entrance of the vault was revealed.

² Philostorgius lived at a time of massive political and religious controversy between two interpretations of Christianity. He was arguing the case for a sect known as Eunomians who were being squeezed between the Arians and those who eventually won - now called the Orthodox. He may well have had access to historical documents which later disappeared.

³ Scholar and statesman and ecumenical patriarch of Constantinople at a time when there was a renaissance of learning in Constantinople (ie the former Byzantium; now called Istanbul - just different names at different times for the same city).

⁴ The reason Julian (known as the Apostate) wanted Jerusalem and the temple rebuilt was because he wanted to return Rome to its old pagan religion. He knew rebuilding Jerusalem would stir up religious hatred and chaos in the region, from which he hoped to benefit. Jerusalem, as we know, had been destroyed by the Romans under Titus (a pagan as it happens, but that's politics for you) in 70 CE.

A few years later, in the 440s, another Greek, Sozimon⁵, also wrote a history. We have this and a separate source of around the same time, Ammianus Marcellus, a Roman historian. Both say that Julian ordered the rebuilding of Jerusalem and then there was an earthquake - but neither mention anything else.

Nine hundred years later, around 1320, another Byzantine Greek historian, Nicephorus Callistus, repeated Philostorgius's story in detail. Some of his work survived and the Library in Freemasons' Hall has a magnificent huge book, printed in 1551, which is a translation of some of it into Latin including Book 10, Chapters 32 and 33, which are about Julian, the rebuilding, the earthquake and the vault.

All very interesting perhaps, if you are an historian, but why did all this become well known in England and enter our history? The answer is that, in 1659, an English scholar and Fellow of Wadham College, Oxford named Samuel Lee wrote a book - it is rather like what we might now call an extended PhD thesis - in which he describes in detail everything he can track down in the Bible and from other texts about King Solomon's Temple. He called the book '*Orbis Miraculum* or The Temple of Solomon'. (The Latin means 'Wonder of the World', which says something about how King Solomon's temple was revered). The book is a very good compendium of information about the temple, and the Library in Freemasons' Hall has three copies of it. The frontispiece shows Solomon robed as a King, wearing a crown and carrying a sceptre. The other figure shown is that of Zadok the Priest, who is wearing priestly robes and a breastplate similar to that described in Exodus Chapter 28 as worn by Aaron, the High Priest in Moses' time.

Samuel Lee translates Nicephorus Callistus' version. First he relates Julian's orders and the earthquake. We then read⁶ '....one of the foundation stones which was placed at the lowest part of the base suddenly started down from its place and opened the door of a certain cave hollowed out in the rock. Owing to its depth, it was difficult to see what was within the cave, so persons were appointed to investigate the matter, who, being anxious to find out the truth, let down one of their workmen by means of a rope. On being lowered down he found stagnant water reaching up to his knees, and having gone round the place and felt the walls on every side, he found the cave to be a perfect square⁷. Then, on his return, as he stood near, about the middle, he struck his foot against a column which stood rising slightly above the water. As soon as he touched this pillar, he found lying upon it a book wrapped up in very fine and thin linen cloth, and as soon as he had lifted it up just as he found it he gave the signal for his companions to draw him up again. As soon as he had regained the light, he showed them the book, which struck them all with astonishment, especially as it appeared so new and fresh, considering the place where it has been found..... As soon as it was opened it shows the following words in large letters: 'In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God'.

In other words, the first words from St John's Gospel, which we know were the 'words on the scroll' until 1835 when the Ritual was de-christianised, as other Short Talks explain.

⁵ Sozimon (400-450) wrote an Ecclesiastical History. Only half of it survives but this includes (in Book 3 Ch

20) a paragraph about Julian ordering the rebuilding of Jerusalem and then the earthquake.

⁶ This translation is an 1865 translation which modernised (to nineteenth century standards) Samuel Lee's seventeenth century English. (Quoted in a lecture by R Jeffery, Grand Lecturer, December 1990). More recent English translations exist, including ones directly from Photius, which therefore give independent confirmation that Callistus used Photius's precis.

⁷ It is interesting that Callistus records a square. In the Bible the Holy of Holies is a rectangle.

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However, it is three or four generations after 1659, not until the 1740s, before we have the first clear evidence of masonic ceremonies which sound like our Royal Arch, and we know that it wasn't until the 1830s that our ritual took its present form. We don't know why or how it was that masons of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries put together our ritual by amalgamating all the elements I have talked about today - but someone, or a number of someones - must have done so. It is, however, pretty clear that it was Samuel Lee's book, which gives so much information about the Temple (the section about its destruction is just the last two pages of a 300 page book) which was the catalyst for this interest. Now, there is a subject for research if you are really interested.

Just as a detail, it is perhaps worth saying that the writers of our ritual would have been familiar with the vaulted chambers of many English cathedrals, so the idea that King Solomon's temple had a vaulted chamber under it would have seemed reasonable to them. In fact the temple in Jerusalem is built on the rock of Mount Moriah and there are still several natural caves or vaults under the buildings there nowadays. And of course it is easy to change the simple column of the legend into the double cube of our ritual.

It has been suggested that introducing the Sojourners is just the way the early writers of our ritual enabled the Candidate to see what was going on by participating.

Companions, I must finish here. (Oh, and finally, I'm sure you know that the word Crypt is just the ancient Greek word meaning 'Secret'. And so much of it still is.... to those who haven't heard this talk!)