

‘TRADITIONAL HISTORY: THE BIBLICAL BACKGROUND’

Presented by E.Comp. **SIMON FERNIE**, PAGSoj: at Supreme Grand Chapter 10th Nov. 1999, the magnificent Temple at Jerusalem, built and furnished by Solomon at stupendous cost of thought, labour and treasure, was not blessed with long life. Solomon was surrounded by pagan peoples; and the Jews themselves tended, from time to time, to fall away into idolatry. Indeed, ten of the twelve tribes broke away, soon after Solomon's death, to form an independent kingdom — which later made the fortified city of Samaria its capital. The two faithful tribes, those of Benjamin and Judah, held the mountain stronghold of Jerusalem, which, commanding the great trade route between Syria and Egypt had brought Solomon both wealth and power. But for some hundreds of years to come the position was a difficult one. In the long wars between the Assyrians and the Egyptians, the territory occupied was often ravaged from many different points.

In the fifth year of king Rehoboam's reign, in 932 BC, the Egyptians sacked Jerusalem and they carried away the gold from the Temple. Then 210 years later, in the year 722, the kingdom of Samaria fell. Israel became a Syrian province and the Ten Tribes were taken captive; but in Jerusalem itself Hezekiah paid tribute to his conquerors and he was able, to some extent, to restore the Temple worship. About eighty years later, in 642, king Josiah repaired the Temple and refurnished it. In the 18th year of his reign, Hilkiyah the High Priest found the *Book of the Law* in the House of the Lord.

What appeared to be the end both of Jerusalem and of its Temple came in the year 586 BC. Under the orders of Nebuchadnezzar, who was at that moment busy founding his Babylonian empire, Jerusalem was sacked by Nebuzaradan and all the Temple treasures were stolen. The two faithful tribes, Benjamin and Judah, were carried off to Babylon. The only people now left in the country of Judea were peasants and others, whose enforced duty was to till the land.

In Babylon the Jewish Exiles lived in small colonies and although they had no temples they were able, to some extent, to form worshipping congregations. These served to keep alive, in at least a section of the people, their love of Judea and their faith in their God. Their lament is set forth in emotional language in *Psalms 137*:

By the rivers of Babylon we sat down; yea, we wept, for we remembered Zion. We hanged our harps on the willows in the midst thereof. For there, those that carried us away captive required of us a song; and they that wasted 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 lose its 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.

The empire, which Nebuchadnezzar had brought together, had short shrift when the Medes and Persians came against it. About seventy years after the Jews went into Exile, Cyrus the Persian conquered Babylon and he extended an empire, which, for the next two centuries, covered all the countries of western Asia. Only a few months after King Cyrus reached Babylon, he issued an edict permitting the Jewish Exiles to return to Judea and invited the two faithful tribes to rebuild the city and the Temple of Jerusalem. His motives in doing so are unknown, but what matters is that he gave the two Tribes his protection, supplied them with treasure and materials for carrying out their work, and he promised to restore the riches carried off from the Temple at Jerusalem some seventy years before. This Proclamation of Cyrus ends the *Second Book of Chronicles*, which is continued in the first few verses of the first chapter of the *Book of Ezra*.

The invitation was not at first warmly or widely accepted; for most of the Jews, having been born in Exile, had never seen Judea and so it was only a small group that at first availed itself of the King's permission to make the long journey to

Judea. A band of pioneers, under Sheshbazzar, returned to Jerusalem in 537 **BC** and started the work. Seventeen years later, a much stronger contingent under Zerubbabel arrived. The returned Exiles were mortified to find that they could occupy only the ruins and immediate vicinity of Jerusalem; for some tribes of mixed blood had moved into Judea during the years of Exile and they were to stir up a lot of distress for the returned Exiles in the years which followed.

Twenty-one years later, in 516 **BC** — under Zerubbabel the Governor, Joshua the High Priest, and the Prophets Haggai and Zechariah —the Second Temple was completed and dedicated to the worship of God. Priests among the returned Exiles regulated the ritual of the new Temple, in accordance with the *Book of the Law*, which had been discovered by Hilkiyah the High Priest just over a century earlier.

In Persia Cyrus had been succeeded by Cambyses in 529 **BC**. He was influenced by the hostility of the tribes dwelling near Jerusalem, and as a result he stopped the work. He, in turn, was succeeded by Darius I in 521, and it was he who gave the returned Exiles badly needed assistance. Throughout the time of the rebuilding they had been harassed by the neighbouring tribes, in whom was more than a tinge of Jewish blood. The Samaritans appealed to king Darius and tried, yet again, to hinder the work; which, however, went on under the constant encouragement of Haggai the Prophet.

King Darius permitted the stolen treasure to be returned to Jerusalem, under an armed escort; and it is this difficult and dangerous journey, which is thought by some writers — but only some — to be symbolised by the early Royal Arch ceremony known as *Passing the Veils*.

Haggai the Prophet deserves a great place in the narrative of the returned Exiles. He had been born in Babylon and he is believed to have travelled to Judea with Zerubbabel. To him fell the immediate task of exhorting the Jews to finish rebuilding the Temple, work in which there had been a break of 16 years,

from 536 to 520, due to the hostile action of the neighbouring tribes. Haggai assured the Jews that “the glory of this latter house shall be greater than of the former” — a difficult prophecy, in as much as the Second Temple could not compare in its richness with the first one; a prophecy claimed to have been fulfilled many years later when Christ entered it.

The history of the period is to be found in the *Book of Ezra*, part of which some scholars believe to have been written by Haggai himself. Not only with the Jews does the memory of Haggai stand in great regard. Both Latin and Greek Churches keep his festival, the Latin on 4th July, the Greek on 16th December.

As the years passed, the Jewish priests, becoming careless and corrupt, neglected the Temple services. In 458 **BC**, fifty-eight years after the completion of the Temple, Ezra the Scribe arrived in Jerusalem. At once he set about reforming and purifying the priesthood. Thirteen years later, in the year 445, Artaxerxes of Persia allowed Nehemiah, his aristocratic Jewish courtier and cupbearer, to return to Jerusalem with the status of *Governor*.

Under Nehemiah, the Jews rebuilt the broken walls of the city in the face of fierce hostility from the Samaritans who suffered under a grievance. They had professed themselves willing to assist the returned Exiles to rebuild the Temple, but had been spurned by the two faithful tribes of Benjamin and Judah; who regarded them in spite of their largely Jewish blood as foreigners. Throughout rebuilding the Temple and the walls of Jerusalem, the Jews had had to reckon with the hostile Samaritans but they rebuilt the city walls in only fifty-two days in spite of fierce opposition.

Their valour is recorded in the *Book of Nehemiah IV 17-18*:

They which builded on the wall, and they that bare burdens, with those that laded, every one with one of his hands wrought in the work, and with the other hand held a

weapon. For the builders, every one had his sword girded by his side, and so builded.

It is this text that the ritual renders “with trowel in hand and sword at side.”

The history of the Second Temple was as racked with trouble as the First. Again plundered and again profaned, the Temple was dedicated to Jupiter. Several years after that, in 168 **BC**, Judas Maccabeus the Deliverer rededicated it; and this is an event which Jews commemorate to this day.

After the death of the Deliverer, the Romans, under Pompey, entered the Temple and the *Holy of Holies*. In 54 **BC** Crassus, as Pompey’s successor finally carried off everything of value. But again the Temple was dedicated; some sort of worship maintained and High Priests continued to be appointed.

Herod the Great, who was an Edomite, besieged Jerusalem and eventually he pulled down the Temple though he allowed the priests to rebuild the *Holy of Holies* while he himself built the great *Court of the Gentiles*.

Ultimately, every single vestige of the Temple of Zerubbabel disappeared, and king Herod erected on its site a temple with which he associated his own name.

This, I believe, is a reasonable but highly condensed story of the Temple history. It provides much of the background for the Holy Royal Arch ritual as we know it today, but I should mention a few inconsistencies, or anachronisms.

In the *Ritual* story three great men — Zerubbabel, Haggai and Joshua — are closely associated with the rebuilding of the Temple during the reign of king Cyrus. Actually it was Zerubbabel who travelled from Babylon to Jerusalem, and when the three did collaborate, it must have been in a later day — that of king Darius, for king Cyrus had forbidden any

work to be carried out. With Haggai was Zechariah, who is not mentioned at all in the Ritual, but both of these Prophets were co-workers with Zerubbabel.

In the Ritual, Ezra and Nehemiah are associated. This is quite a serious anachronism, for although Ezra came to Jerusalem some seventy years later than Zerubbabel had, Nehemiah did not arrive in the city for thirteen more years. A period of eighty years thus separated Zerubbabel, on the one hand, and Ezra and Nehemiah on the other. Their work was rebuilding of the walls of the *city*, not those of the *Temple* — although this last point is of small moment; from the Masonic point of view, both the Temple and the city of Jerusalem are considered as one.

The Sojourners, who had come to Jerusalem by permission of king Cyrus, apparently did not arrive until Darius was on the throne. In the ritual, they make their report to the Grand Sanhedrin, which is unlikely to have existed in Zerubbabel's day.

A final thought — then I will end this short Paper

The *kingly* power would *never* have been restored by Persia “in the person of Zerubbabel to the royal line of David and princely tribe of Judah”; for Judea had become a satrapy of Persia. Perhaps the phrase ‘*kingly* power’ should be changed to ‘*ruling* power’? Zerubbabel was certainly not a *king*, as David and Solomon had been kings. He was appointed as Satrap, as *Governor* — a ruler, *not* a king. It was no longer an independent kingdom for the kingdoms of the Jews, of Israel and of Judea, had been utterly destroyed at the time of the Babylonian Exile.