The Principal Characters of the Royal Arch Story

by Percy Jantz March 16, 2004
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A companion who is well acquainted with the story of the return from captivity and the building of the second temple, from the Royal Arch Ritual, and who had not checked it in the Volume of the Sacred Law, would have quite a vivid picture in his mind.
He would believe that the incidents narrated occurred shortly after Cyrus the Great became King of Persia; that Zerubabel, Haggai and Joshua had led the children of Israel back across the desert from Babylon to Jerusalem, and that those three leaders ruled over a solemn Sanhedrin (Parliament) which governed the returned exiles & that Ezra and Nehemiah were attendants upon that Grand Sanhedrin who assisted Zerubabel, Haggai and Joshua in their task of rebuilding the temple at Jerusalem.
The Bible is the best book there is on Royal Arch Masonry, but it tells the story somewhat differently.
When we look at the bible as history, we make three remarkable discoveries.

First, that the return from captivity and the rebuilding of the temple are two quite separate and distinct stories.

The return may have come shortly after Cyrus the Great became King of Persia and defeated the Babylonians. That return may have been led by Zerubabel and Joshua, but it wasn't until the arrival of Haggai the Prophet some 15 years later that there was any attempt to rebuild the temple.

The second fact of interest is that the Sanhedrin or Parliament did not exist until some 500 years later. Nor was there any other governing body over which Zerubabel, Haggai and Joshua could have presided.

The third fact is that neither Ezra nor Nehemiah had any connection with Zerubabel, Haggai, or Joshua, or with a grand Sanhedrin, or the rebuilding of the temple.
Ezra did not leave Babylon until nearly 60 years after the second temple was completed, while Nehemiah followed him some 12 years later.

These are the bald facts and can be confirmed with any reading of the bible. I propose NOW to tell the biblical account of these folks.

The whole story has to be seen against the backdrop of Israel's history as a nation which began with their release from Egypt under the guidance of Moses.
Shortly after that, the worship of Jehovah was established in a tabernacle erected by Moses and in the closing ceremony of a Chapter is referred to as the First and Holy Lodge.
That tabernacle was the central point of every encampment during the years of wandering in the desert of Sinai. It was a symbol of the central position the worship occupied and was the one settled feature in the life of the wandering Jews.

They formed a nation settled in Canaan, under the first king, Saul. He was succeeded by David, who made plans to demonstrate the settled character of the new state by erecting a temple in stone and erected an altar on the selected site. **This became the site of Jerusalem.**

His son Solomon erected a temple on that site, symbolizing the permanence of their state. That feeling of permanence grew substantially over the next 4 centuries, and led to a complacency in personal conduct and religious observance. This aroused fierce denunciations by the prophet Jeremiah in the time of king Jehoiakin. (jeho-akin)

Jeremiah's warnings went unheeded and an attack by the Babylonians in 598 BC overthrew the state. The king, his harems, his nobles, priests and skilled workers were carried off to Babylon. The Babylonians took away all the golden ornaments and sacred vessels from the temple.
This is the first exile, the time of the prophets Ezekiel and Daniel.
The Jewish nation reeled under this shock and felt their god had deserted them.

But worse was yet to come.

King Jehoiakin's successor was Zedekiah (zedekai). who had sworn allegiance to king Nebuchadnezzar, the victorious Babylonian (Chaldean) king.
However, he got sneaky, gathered the neighbouring kings and together with Egypt formed an alliance against the Chaldean (kaldean) power with himself at the head. Chaldea was the area where Babylon was located.

Jeremiah in Jerusalem and Ezekiel in Babylon were incensed by this folly which could only result in punishment…and it did.
King Zedekiah was besieged in Jerusalem for 18 months. Those in the city were weakened by famine and disease and the Babylonians eventually breached the walls of the city and overran it.
The Jews who were not slaughtered were carried off, the remaining temple ornaments were taken, even the two great pillars at the porch way, the embodiment of stability, were broken to pieces and taken as scrap metal.

It is impossible to overstate the impact on the Jews. Their capital, Jerusalem, which had become Zion, the holy city, the centre of their world, had now been sacked, burned and ruined. What wouldn't burn was knocked down. The very walls of the city, which were essential in those days, were broken down.

The greatest blow was to their pride and faith. A free people had become slaves. It fell as if a curse from heaven. The Book of Lamentations is attributed to Jeremiah. To quote Lamentations II, 5-7

"The lord is like an enemy, he has swallowed up Israel; he has swallowed up Israel, he has swallowed up all her palaces and destroyed her strongholds. He has multiplied mourning and lamentation for the Daughter of Judah.

He has laid waste his dwelling like a garden; he has destroyed his place of meeting.
The lord has made Zion forget her appointed feasts and Sabbaths. In his fierce anger he hath spurned both, the king and priest.
The lord has rejected his altar, and has abandoned his sanctuary. He has handed over to the enemy the walls of her palaces."

Those are very harsh words by an obviously very dismayed people.

Now Jeremiah wrote that the exile in Babylon would last 70 years. People remembered that he had foretold the disaster, so they took heart. They fixed their gaze on 70 years hence, when God's wrath would be exhausted and the people would have worked out that period for their sins.

60 years later, in 538 BC Cyrus, the king of Persia, was pursuing his career of conquest and overran Babylon. He had been victorious over Asia Minor and now the Jewish exiles watched his approach as a forgone conclusion for they thought he was the one chosen to liberate them.
It is claimed that at their release he charged the Jews with rebuilding the temple at Jerusalem, (This bit of biblical history is not supported by non-Jewish authors)

When Cyrus gave permission to the Jews to return only 42,000 took advantage.
Those who had ended up in Assyrian captivity in the north did not go and many who had settled in the rich plains of Babylon and were content to remain.

Some had positions of influence and didn't want to leave.

But 42,000 Jews and 7,000 slaves did return across the desert. They were headed by the last direct heir of the house of David, the grandson of the king Jehoiakin…remember him?

This grandson's name was Zerubabel and he was accompanied by Joshua, the son of Josedek, the high priest who had also been carried off to exile. They were also accompanied by an old priest next to them in rank, called Sariaiah. (Sariah) He comes up later.

It would be convenient at this point to remark that the Jews and Judah were not a sovereign people, but only a Persian colony. For two hundred years, King Cyrus, and his successors were to exercise influence through a Persia governor who was the immediate local ruler. He was known as the Tirshatha or the Pasha, an old Assyrian word which is still in use in the Middle East.

There is little information of their trek across the dessert, but they did reach their destination, Jerusalem. They arrived with their minds filled with thoughts of rebuilding the temple.
It was Zerubabel's chief mission, and he took steps shortly after his arrival to erect an altar upon the place where Solomon's temple had been.
Morning and evening sacrifices were resumed. Next Zerubabel laid the foundation stone and began building.

Immediately opposition arose from two directions.

First the people who had been left in Jerusalem land laid claim to it, so that the exiles had difficulty in finding fertile land to farm. Those Jews who had been left behind, made temple building tough as they sought to influence the pasha, against its being built.

The second opposition was from the Samaritans, who had claimed to worship Jehovah also and wanted their right to a share of the building. Sounds almost like a modern political fight, between the newcomers and a group of outsiders who wanted to partake in a national work, but whose cooperation was refused.

What followed was accusation and counteraccusation.

Then some things changed. There was a new king of Persia, king Darius, and like Cyrus, he gave encouragement. Also there appeared two prophets in Jerusalem, who had made the journey from Babylon. These were minor prophets but both were fired up with zeal. They were Haggai and Zechariah.

Haggai was an old man. He saw the returned people were without spirit as they had left the fertile Babylon to get only the worst soil in Jerusalem, and were experiencing crop failure and poverty. They had heard how this was a land of milk and honey but had seen none of it.
Haggai became the great encourager. He blamed the people for their apathy, rebuked and scorned them, told them to get on with building the temple.

Zechariah had a florid and visionary style and between them they inspired the people.
Within 5 years the temple was complete and was dedicated by 515 BC.
There is a Jewish legend that Zerubabel returned to Babylon to seek help from the king but it is not substantiated. But it is recorded that the king made a decree to not only restore the gold and silver, but also to cover the building expenses out of the Persian treasury.

It is there the story of the rebuilding of the second temple really ends.

Now some 60 years later, about 458 BC**, Ezra** the scribe a descendant of Sariaiah, remember Sariaiah, he was with Zerubabel when they returned across the desert?

Well he went up to Jerusalem from Babylon and found the worship lax, the inhabitants selfish, almost anarchy reining. He was stuck with horror, and set about a great work of reform which gave a new and lasting spirit to the Jews for generations.

Thirteen years later, **Nehemiah** a Babylon Jew and court favourite in the king's court, asked permission to repair Jerusalem's ruined walls. He was appointed pasha or governor and told to go to it.
In the king's name, he recruited, requisitioned, and rebuilt the walls in 52 days. It is recorded that Nehemiah himself, his slaves and bodyguard, worked the whole time, 'never removed their clothes'.
It is this building of the walls where our ritual refers to
"with trowel in hand and sword by their side."
In this respect we commemorate, not the rebuilding of the temple, but of the walls of the city.

So at the end it was a combination of Ezra and Nehemiah who were the great restorers of Jerusalem, one the aged scribe, teaching and enforcing **Mosaic Law**, the other the young statesman & warrior fortifying a city, who made their place before the judgment of god and history. They demonstrate impenetrable toughness and persistency.

And that is the biblical account of our chief characters of Royal Arch Masonry

Comment
Hopefully this paper will help us all to gain a better understanding of the times and circumstances in place and being depicted in our Rituals and Lectures and by doing so help us to get a better view of the esoteric messages being conveyed. I know that I am thoroughly enjoying this research and treasure the opportunity to share.

Have a wonderful day & God Bless You and Yours
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