

Lecture 10 - Historical Aspects of the Royal Arch

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Masonry is a peculiar System of Morality, veiled in Allegory & Illustrated by Symbols. However, this is not phased if historical facts do not tie up with Masonic tradition; it is what we draw from them that are important; nevertheless it is interesting to see just how these events do tie up and that is what we are going to look at.

First some caveats; not all sources agree with each other as to precise dates, so everything could be a year or so either way; spelling of names varies because there was sometimes not a literal translation of certain characters in ancient scripts into our own; records that have come down to us sometimes are drawn from the Hebrew/Jewish texts, sometimes from the non-Jewish texts - thus for example, the 3 men cast into the fiery furnace Ananius, Azarius & Misael appear in the book of Daniel as Shadrach, Mishak & Abed-nego, their Chaldean names - so you have to be careful; finally, this is my opinion!

After the death of King Solomon, the kingdom divided into two with 10 tribes in the north forming Israel & 2 tribes (J & B) in the south forming Judah. The northern kingdom of Israel, capital Samaria, had been overwhelmed by the Assyrians in 721 BC and the people were partly carried off and the country resettled by Assyrians and others who intermarried with the locals thus forming, in the eyes of the people of Judah an impure race, no longer part of the Chosen people, hence the animosity in Jesus's times of the Jews to the Samaritans and the added poignancy of the story of the good Samaritan.

Meanwhile the kingdom of Judah had been going through some bad times but when Josiah became king in 640 BC he instituted a revival of the true religious ceremonies and sought to restore Judah to the true ways of the scriptural teachings. He was seen by his people as definitely sent by God, and it was a great shock to them when he was killed fighting against the Egyptians. In his place, Jehoahaz became king, not the eldest but anti-Egyptian. Unfortunately he was defeated by the Egyptians after only 3 months in power and the Egyptians forced Judah to accept his brother Eliakim, whom they renamed Jehochim, as king. He was not good news. He had to pay heavy tribute to Egypt for having lost the war, he also did not continue the religious work of Josiah but allowed things to deteriorate, and it is against him that many of Jeremiah's warnings were given, which were largely ignored, indeed Jeremiah was largely seen as a traitor and was often in danger of death.

By this time the Assyrian Empire had largely broken up and a new power was rising in Babylon, where Nabopolassar had declared himself independent in 625 and set out to establish an empire of his own. He subdued parts of what is now Syria & eastern Turkey and advanced down the coast through Tyre & Sidon until his death in 604. He was succeeded by his son Nebuchadrezzar who continued the campaign, taking the Gaza strip and then advancing on Jerusalem which he besieged in 603 and Jehochim was forced to pay tribute to him. (Sometimes given as start of the 70 years exile). Two years later, Jehochim entered into an alliance with Egypt and others against Nebuchadrezzar whose army defeated the Egyptians and laid siege to Jerusalem during which Jehochim died. His son Jehochin, saw the situation was hopeless and after a couple of months surrendered. He was led into captivity in Babylon - a sort of house arrest for 37 years, but was well treated by the Babylonians - as were other captured kings - with him went about 1000 others mostly nobles, soldiers, some priests and workmen such as blacksmiths and armourers.

Nebuchadrezzar now put Jehochim's uncle Zedekiah as ruler, although it would seem most people still recognised Jehochin as king even in exile. Zedekiah was not good news either. Despite consulting Jeremiah, and then ignoring his advice, he too entered into an alliance with the Egyptians against Nebuchadrezzar in 589. The following year the Chaldean army arrived and after 18 months siege broke through the walls and Nebuchadrezzar determined to end any future uprisings there. Consequently the walls were knocked down, the temple & royal palace looted and destroyed and the vast majority of the people carried off to Babylon. Most of those who were not carried off fled to Egypt or to Benjamin. Zedekiah had to watch while his children were killed in front of him and then had his eyes gouged out before being taken to Babylon, where presumably he died.

The people of Judah were now settled in particular areas of and around Babylon, initially in a state of some despair. Many however found refuge in their faith thanks to prophets like Ezekiel & 2nd Isaiah who rose up to comfort the people and strangely enough thanks also to Jeremiah whose teachings and warnings they now remembered and used them as a way of rebuilding their religious observances. Nevertheless, in time many of them rather liked Babylon and prospered, some even becoming senior government officials, and Aramaic, the language of business in the empire became their normal tongue rather than Hebrew.

When Nebuchadrezzar died in 561 his successor freed Jehochin from house arrest but the exiles were not free to go home. Nebuchadrezzar's successors were not up to the task of ruling the empire and the imperial power gradually broke down. The northern part fell to the Medes who now expanded throughout the region. The last king of Babylon was Nabonidas who tried to reform things but the people weren't interested and he left the city and went off to campaign in what is now Saudi Arabia, leaving his son Belthassar to rule as regent - and he was even more hopeless.

Part of the Median empire was Persia and now a new dynasty was ruling there led by Cyrus who defeated and then assimilated the Medes, (Laws of the M&P) then defeated the supposedly fabulously rich Croesus of Lydia and then marched on Babylon which his army entered unopposed on 29 Aug 539 - largely because the people were fed up with Balthassar/Nabonidas.

It is the following year that he issued his famous Edict to allow the Temple at Jerusalem to be rebuilt and the holy vessels restored - and he probably did the same for other captured leaders but we don't know. His motive seems to have been 3fold; first religious, he worshiped a god who allowed other "sub-gods" to be his helpers in the world and when he talks in his edict of "The Lord God of Heaven" it is doubtful that he meant JHWH even though the writer of the book of Ezra adds the extra words "Who is in Jerusalem". Nevertheless Cyrus was not keen to force a single religion on his empire. This brings us to the second reason: Cyrus believed that he could gain stability in his empire through loyalty rather than fear, an idea in which he was much ahead of his time and so by allowing captured peoples to return and follow their own customs he hoped to win their affection. Indeed some of the Jewish writers saw him as the Agent of God. Finally, he needed Judah to be a strong point in his empire as it was his southern boundary with Egypt who remained a major threat.

The first wave of returning exiles set out in 536, probably led by Sheshbezzar, youngest son of Jehoichin (who presumably had now died). Probably about 1000 people in all, mostly people connected with the work of the Temple, but with only 4 priestly families. They found a very hostile reception from those still occupying the land, especially the Samaritans who had been put in charge of the Jerusalem area. There was also famine & drought to contend with and it is probably not surprising that more of the exiles did not return, given that they were doing rather nicely in Babylon. They started to rebuild the Temple, refusing help from the Samaritans, because they were impure - hence the reference in the ritual to allowing no strangers to partake in the work - but it was slow going and the people soon got disheartened. The Samaritans also resisted the rebuilding of the walls, hence the reference in the ritual to the sword & trowel, and in 522 the Samaritans sent word to the new king of Persia to say that the returned exiles were plotting against him - which they weren't - and he ordered the work to stop. However in 520 when Darius assumed power a second and much larger wave of exiles returned led by **Zerubbabel**, who was the son of Shealtiel, Jehoichin's eldest son. He was assisted by **Joshua** the High priest and **Haggai** & Zechariah the prophets. Haggai seems to have been the moving force and roused those already there by saying "What? You have built yourselves houses but not the Temple? How dare you?" Thus work restarted and was finally completed in 515 BC.

The early years of Darius's reign were also a period of uncertainty as to whether he would be able to keep the empire together and there were factions at Jerusalem - encouraged by Haggai & Zechariah - who thought this was about to be the time of the Messianic revival and that they should join the unrest. Zerubbabel resisted these pressures much to the dismay of H & Z nevertheless once Darius had established his position, the news of the unrest in Jerusalem had reached him and he dismissed Zerubbabel and appointed his own governor to administer Judah. Zerubbabel was thus the last of the kings of Judah despite having 4 or 5 sons and his ultimate fate is unknown. From then on the High Priest became the leader of the Jewish nation and

the final arbiter of all religious and civil matters in the country. Hence the importance of his position in the time of Jesus. Joshua now effectively in charge and his descendents filled that office for the next 200 years or so.

Haggai, as we have seen returned with Zerubbabel to Jerusalem and according to one authority his mission lasted just 4 months, in 520 from 1st of 6th to 24th of 9th. If this is correct it must have been pretty intense, but it may have been that that was just the period when he was exhorting the people to restart work on the temple.

Nehemiah was a most remarkable man; he rose from relatively humble origins to be the Cup-bearer of the King Artaxerxes Longimanus. In 444 he was sent to Jerusalem to be the Governor of the Province. He was immediately struck by the poor condition of the city and its inhabitants and set about redressing that situation. He first set about rebuilding the city walls which were completed in 52 days, though the fortifications & towers etc. took another 2½ years. He then set about serious social reforms, like cancelling the debts of the poor, the observance of the Sabbath and the restoration of the Sacred Law. He also induced many of the prominent members of the community to actually come and live in Jerusalem as a means of helping its security and he tried to bring about rapprochement with the Samaritans though his efforts were short lived. After 12 years he returned to his master in Susa; whether he then returned or remained at Susa is unknown.

Finally we come to **Ezra**. We know that he came to Jerusalem in the 7th year of the reign of Artaxerxes, but whether that was Artaxerxes I, and thus 457 or Artaxerxes II and thus 398 is difficult to ascertain. Traditional teaching was that it was the earlier time and that he was accompanied by another large wave of returning exiles and that he & Nehemiah worked together but modern scholarship is not so sure. Certainly he was a Priest of the line of Zadok and a Scribe in the Jewish sense, i.e. a studier of the Law. His title from the Persians was "The Scribe (i.e. Royal Secretary) for the law of the God in Heaven". Irrespective of when he lived, he worked hard to restore the purity of the Law, beginning with a bit of ethnic cleansing, by persuading all the Jewish men who had married foreign wives to divorce them and marry good Jewish girls. During his time the Pentateuch was edited, more or less as it is today, the square characters of Hebrew text introduced and the Great Assembly of the people Knesseth -Gedolah - established.

Whether Ezra & Nehemiah are the authors of the books in the Bible bearing their names is still debated, most probably bits of them are their work but edited by whoever wrote the Books of Chronicles some time later.