

# ROYAL ARCH HISTORY

IN THREE LECTURES

BY ALBERT G. MACKEY, MD.

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## LECTURE 1

### THE DESTRUCTION OF THE TEMPLE.

“They have cast fire into thy sanctuary; they have defiled by *casting down* the dwelling place of thy name to the ground.”—Psalm lxxiv. 7

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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 Ornan 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.

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## LECTURE 2

### THE CAPTIVITY AT BABYLON.

“By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down; yea, we wept when we remembered Zion. We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof.”-Psalm cxxxvii. 1-2.

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Between that portion of the ritual of the Royal Arch which refers to the destruction of the first temple, and that subsequent part which symbolises the building of the second, there is an interregnum (if we may be allowed the term) in the ceremonial of the degree, which must be considered as a long interval in history, the filling up of which, like the interval between the acts of a play, must be left to the imagination of the spectator. This interval represents the time passed in the captivity of the Jews at Babylon. That captivity lasted for seventy years, from the reign of Nebuchadnezzar until the reign of Cyrus, although but fifty-two of these years are commemorated in the Royal Arch degree. During this period many circumstances of great interest and importance occurred, which must be perfectly understood to enable us to appreciate the concluding portion of the ceremonies of that degree.

“Babylon the great,” as the prophet Daniel calls it, the city to which the captive Jews were conducted by Nebuchadnezzar, was situated four hundred and seventy five miles in a nearly due east direction from Jerusalem. It stood in the midst of a large and fertile plain on each side of the river Euphrates, which ran through it from north to south. It was surrounded by walls which were eighty-seven feet thick, three hundred and fifty in height, and sixty miles in compass. These were all built of large bricks, cemented together with bitumen. Exterior to the walls was a wide and deep trench, lined with the same material. Twenty-five gates on each side, made of solid brass, gave admission to the city. From each of these gates proceeded a wide street, fifteen miles in length, and the whole was separated by means of other smaller divisions, and contained six hundred and seventy-six squares, each of which was two miles and a quarter in circumference. Two hundred and fifty towers, placed upon the walls, afforded the means of additional strength and protection. Within this immense circuit were to be found palaces and temples and other edifices of the utmost magnificence, which have caused the wealth, the luxury and the splendour of Babylon to become the favourite theme of the historians of antiquity, and which compelled the prophet Isaiah, even while denouncing its downfall, to speak of it as “the glory of kingdoms, the beauty of the Chaldees’ excellency.”

To this city the captives were conducted. What was the exact number removed we have no means of ascertaining. We are led to believe from certain passages of Scripture that the deportation was not complete.\* Calmet says that Nebuchadnezzar carried away only the principal inhabitants, the warriors and artisans of every kind (which would, of course, include the masons), and that he left the husbandmen, the labourers, and, in general, the poorer classes that constituted the great

- Jeremiah (li.16) says that Nebuzaradan left “certain of the poor of the land for vine-dressers and for husbandmen.

body of the people. Among the prisoners of distinction, Josephus mentions the high priest, Seraiah, and Zephaniah, the priest that was next him, with the three rulers that guarded the temple, the eunuch that was over the armed men, seven friends of Zedekiah, his scribe and sixty other rulers. Zedekiah, the king, had attempted to escape, previous to the termination of the siege, but being pursued was captured and carried to Riblah, the headquarters of Nebuchadnezzar, where, having first been compelled to behold the slaughter of his children, his eyes were then put out, and he was conducted in chains to Babylon.

A Masonic tradition informs us that the captive Jews were bound by their conquerors with triangular chains, and that this was done by the Chaldeans as an additional insult, because the Jewish masons were known to esteem the triangle as an emblem of the sacred name of God, and must have considered its appropriation as a desecration of the Tetragrammaton.

Of the road pursued by the Chaldeans with their prisoners we can judge only from conjecture. It is, however, recorded that they were carried by Nebuzaradan, the captain of Nebuchadnezzar's army, direct from Jerusalem to Riblah, where Nebuchadnezzar had fixed his headquarters. Riblah was situated on the northern border of Palestine, about two hundred miles northeast of Jerusalem, and was the city through which the Babylonians were accustomed to pass in their eruptions into and departures from Judea.

From Jerusalem to Riblah, the journey is necessarily through Damascus, and the route from Riblah was direct to Palmyra. Hence, we have every reason for supposing that the Chaldean army, with the captives, took that route which is described by Heeren\*, and which would have conducted them from Jerusalem, through Damascus, to Riblah in a northerly direction. Here Nebuchadnezzar commanded Seraiah the high priest, and the rulers, to the amount of seventy, to be put to death. Thence directing their course to the north-east, they arrived at Thapsacus, an important commercial town on the Euphrates, which river they crossed somewhat lower down at a place called Circesium. They then journeyed in a southerly direction, through the Median wall and along the east bank of the Euphrates to Babylon. By this route they avoided making a large circuit to the north, or crossing an extensive desert which could supply no water.

The condition of Jerusalem after the departure of the captives is worthy of consideration. Previous to his departure to from Jerusalem, Nebuzaradan appointed Gedaliah, who was the son of Ahikam, a person of an illustrious family, governor of the remnant of the Jews who were left behind. Gedaliah is described by the Jewish historian as being of "a gentle and righteous disposition." He established his seat of government at Mispah, and induced those who had fled during the siege, and who were scattered over the country, to return and cultivate the land, promising them protection and favour if they consented to continue peaceable and pay a small tribute to the king of Babylon.

Among those who had fled on the approach of the Chaldean army was Ishmael, one of the royal family, a wicked and crafty man, who, during the siege of Jerusalem, had sought protection at the court of the King of the Ammorites. Ishmael was secretly instigated by Bealis; the Ammoritish monarch, to slay Gedaliah, that, as one of the royal family, he might himself ascend the throne of David.

\* In his Appendix "on the Commercial Routes of Ancient Asia," affixed to his Historical Researches.—Appendix xii ii. 2.

Notwithstanding that Gedaliah was informed of this nefarious design, he refused, in his unsuspecting temper, to believe the report, and consequently fell a victim to the treachery of Ishmael, who slew him while partaking of his hospitality. Ishmael then attempted to carry the inhabitants of Mispah into captivity, and fled with them to the king of the Ammorites; but being overtaken by the friends of Gedaliah, who had armed themselves to avenge his death, the captives were rescued and Ishmael put to flight. The Jews, fearing that if they remained they would be punished by the Babylonians for the murder of Gedaliah, retired to Egypt. Five years later, Nebuchadnezzar, having invaded and conquered Egypt, carried all the Jews he found there to Babylon. "And such," says Josephus, "was the end of the nation of the Hebrews." Jerusalem was now desolate. Its king and its people were removed to Babylon, but it remained unpopulated by foreign colonies, perhaps, as Whiston suggests, "as an indication of Providence that the Jews were to re-people it without opposition themselves."

Let us turn now to the more immediate object of this lecture, and examine the condition of the captives during their sojourn in Babylon.

Notwithstanding the ignominious mode of their conveyance from Jerusalem, and the vindictiveness displayed by their conqueror in the destruction of their city and temple, they do not appear, on their arrival at Babylon, to have been subjected to any of the extreme rigours of slavery. They were distributed into various parts of the empire; some remaining in the city, while others were sent into the provinces. The latter probably distributed themselves to agricultural pursuits, while the former were engaged in commerce or in the labours of architecture. Anderson says, that Nebuchadnezzar, having applied himself to the design of finishing his buildings at Babylon, engaged therein all the able artists of Judea and other captives to join his own Chaldean Masons.\* They were permitted to retain their personal property, and even to purchase lands and erect houses. Their civil and religious government was not utterly destroyed, for they retained a regular succession of kings and high priests, one of each of whom returned with them, as will be seen hereafter, on their restoration. Some of the principal captives were advanced to offices of dignity and power in the royal palace, and were permitted to share in the councils of state. Their prophets of state, Daniel and Ezekiel, with their associates, preserved among their countrymen the pure doctrines of their religion, and taught that belief in the Divine Being which constituted the most important principle in Primitive Freemasonry, in opposition to the spurious system practised by their idolatrous conquerors. "The people," says Oliver, "who adhered to the worship of God, and they were neither few nor insignificant, continued to meet in their schools, or lodges, for the undisturbed practice of their system of ethical Freemasonry, which they did not fail to propagate for their mutual consolation during this calamitous reverse of fortune and for the benefits of their descendants.\*\*

The rabbinical writers inform us that during the captivity a fraternity was established for the preservation of traditional knowledge, which was transmitted to a few initiates, and that on the restoration, Zerubbabel, Joshua and Esdras carried all this secret instruction to Jerusalem, and there established a similar fraternity. The principal seats of this institution were at Naharda, on the Euphrates, at Sora, and at Pompeditha. \*\*\*

\* Book of Constitutions, page 17 edition 1723.

\*\* Historical Landmarks, volume ii, p.410

\*\*\* See Mackey's Lexicon of Freemasonry, word *Naharda*.. It is but fair to remark that the authors of the "Encyclopedie Methodique," in common with many other writers, place the establishment of these colleges at a much later date, and subsequent to the Christian era. But Oliver supposes them to have been founded during the captivity.

Among the remarkable events that occurred during the captivity, we are to account the visit of Pythagoras to Babylon. This ancient philosopher was, while in Egypt, taken prisoner by Cambyses, during his invasion of that country, and carried to Babylon, where he remained for twelve years. There he is said to have had frequent interviews with Ezekiel, and to have derived from the instructions of the prophet much of that esoteric system of philosophy into which he afterwards indoctrinated his disciples.

Jehoiachin, who had been the king of Judah before Zedekiah, and had been dethroned and carried as a captive to Babylon, remained in prison for thirty–seven years, during the long reign of Nebuchadnezzar. But at the death of that monarch, his son and successor, Evilmerodach, restored the captive king to liberty, and promoted him to great honour in his palace. Evilmerodach, who was infamous for his vices, reigned only two years, when he was deposed and put to death by his own relations, and Neriglissar, his sister’s husband, ascended the throne. Jehoiachin is said to have died at the same time, or, as Prideaux conjectures, he was, as the favourite of Evilmerodach, slain with him.

After the death of Jehoiachin, Salathiel or Shealtiel, his son, became the “head of the captivity,” or nominally the Jewish king.

Neriglissar, or Niglissar, as he was called by Josephus, reigned for forty years, and then was succeeded by his son Labosordacus. This monarch became by his crimes hateful to the people, and, after a short reign of only nine months, was slain by his own subjects. The royal line, whose throne had been usurped by Neriglissar, was then restored in the person of Belshazzar, one of the descendents of Nebuchadnezzar. Belshazzar was an effeminate and licentious monarch, indulging in luxury and dissipation, while the reins of government were entrusted to his mother, Nitocris. He was, therefore, but ill-prepared by temper or ability to oppose the victorious arms of Cyrus, the King of Persia, and Darius, the King of Media, who made war upon him. Consequently, after an inglorious reign of seventeen years, his power was wrested from him, the city of Babylon was taken by Cyrus, and the Babylonian power was forever annihilated.

After the death of Shealtiel, the sovereignty of the Jews was transmitted to his son, Zerubbabel, who thus became the head of the captivity, or normal Prince of Judea.

While the line of the Jewish monarchs was thus preserved, during the captivity, in the house of David, the Jews were not less careful to maintain the due succession of the high priesthood; for Jehosadek, the son of Seraiah, was the high priest that was carried by Nebuchadnezzar to Babylon, and when he died, during the captivity, he was succeeded in his sacred office by his eldest son, Joshua.

In the first year of the reign of Cyrus the captivity of the Jews was terminated. Cyrus, from his conversations with Daniel and the other Jewish captives of learning and piety, as well as his perusal of their sacred books, more especially the prophecies of Isaiah, had become imbued with a knowledge of true religion, and hence had publicly announced to his subjects his belief in the God “which the nation of the Israelites worshipped.” He was consequently impressed with an earnest desire to fulfil the prophetic declarations, of which he was the subject, and to rebuild the temple of Jerusalem. Accordingly he issued a proclamation, which we find in Ezra, as follows:



“Thus saith Cyrus, King of Persia, The Lord God of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and he hath charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judea. Who is there among you of all his people? His God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judea. And build the house of the Lord God of Israel, (he is the God,) which is in Jerusalem.”

With the publication of this proclamation of Cyrus, commences what may be called the second part of the Royal Arch degree. The whole space of time occupied in the captivity, and the events connected with that portion of the Jewish History, are not referred to in the ceremonies, but constitute, as we have already remarked, an interval like the period of time supposed to pass in a drama, between the falling of a curtain at the close of one act and its being raised at the commencement of the subsequent one. But now there are “glad tidings of great joy” as given in this proclamation to the Jews. The captives are liberated – the exiles are permitted to return home. Leaving the banks of the Euphrates, they direct their anxious steps over *rough and rugged roads* to that beloved mountain of the Lord, where their ancestors were so long wont to worship. The events connected with this restoration are of deep attraction to the mason, since the history abounds in interesting and instructive legends. But the important of the subject demands that we should pursue the investigation in a separate lecture.

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## LECTURE 3

### THE RETURN TO JERUSALEM.

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“For lo, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will bring again the captivity of my people Israel and Judah, saith the Lord; and I will cause to return to the land that I gave to their fathers, and they shall possess it. Jeremiah xxx. 3

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We have now arrived at that portion of history of the Babylonish captivity which is allegorised in the concluding ceremonies of the Royal Arch degree. And here we may incidentally observe, that the same analogy which exists in the Master’s degree to the ancient mysteries, is also to be found in the Royal Arch. The Masonic scholar, who is familiar with the construction of these mysteries of the Pagan priests and philosopher, is well aware that they inculcate by symbolic and allegoric instruction, the great lessons in the resurrection of the body and the immortality of the soul. Hence they were all funereal in their character. They commenced in sorrow, they terminated in joy. The death or destruction of some eminent personage, most generally a god, was depicted in the beginnings of the ceremonies of initiation, while the close was occupied in illustrating, in the same manner, the discovery of his grave, the recovery of the body, and the restoration of life eternal. The same religious instruction is taught in the Master’s degree. The evidenced of this fact, it is unnecessary for us here to demonstrate. It will be at once apparent to every mason who is sufficiently acquainted with the ritual of his order.

But is it not equally apparent that the same system, though under a thicker veil, is preserved in the ceremonies of the Royal Arch? There is a resurrection of that which has been buried—a discovery of that which had been lost—an exchange of that which, like the soul, is intended to be permanent. The life which we pass on earth is but a *substitute* for that glorious one which we are to spend in eternity. And it is in the grave, in the depths of the earth, that the corruptible puts on incorruption, that the mortal puts on immortality,\* and that the substitute of this temporal life is exchanged for the blessed reality of life eternal.

The interval to which we alluded in the last lecture, and which is occupied by the captivity of the Jews at Babylon, is now over, and the allegory of the Royal Arch is resumed with the restoration of the captives to their home.

Five hundred and thirty-six years before the Christian era, Cyrus issued his decree for the return of the Jews. At the same time he restored to them all the sacred vessels and precious ornaments of the first temple, which had been carried away by Nebuchadnezzar, and which were still in existence.

\* I. Corinth xv. 53

Forty-two thousand three hundred and sixty of the Jews repaired, in the same year, from Babylon and the neighbouring cities to Jerusalem. The leaders of these were Zerubbabel, Joshua and Haggai, of whom, as they perform an important part in the history of this event as recorded in the Royal Arch, it is incumbent on us to speak more particularly.\*

Zerubbabel was, at the time of the restoration, the possessor of the regal authority among the Jews, as the prince of the captivity and a descendent of the house of David, and as such he assumed at Jerusalem the office of King. He was the son of Shealtiel, who was the son of Jehoiachin, the monarch who had been deposed by Nebuchadnezzar and carried away to Babylon. He was the intimate friend of Cyrus, and indeed, it is supposed that it was principally through his influence that the Persian monarch was induced to decree the liberation of the captives.

Joshua, the High Priest, was, like Zerubbabel, entitled to his office by the indisputable claim of direct descent from the ancient hierarchy. He was the son of Josedech, and the grandson of Seraiah, who had been the High Priest when Jerusalem was taken by Nebuchadnezzar.

Of Haggai, the Scribe, but little is known that can be relied on. We know nothing of the place or the time of his birth, but it is supposed that he was born at Babylon during the captivity. He was the first of the three prophets who flourished after the captivity, and his writings, though few, (so few, indeed, that some theologians have supposed that the larger portion of them has perished,) all relate to the building of the second temple. The office of scribe, which is the one assigned to him in the Royal Arch degree, was one of great importance in the Jewish economy. The *sophors* or scribes constituted, says Dr. Beard, \*\* a learned, organised, much esteemed and highly influential body of men, recognised and supported by the state. They were learned in the laws, and it was their duty to expound them to the people. Horne\*\*\* says that the scribe seems to have been the king's secretary of state, and as such to have registered all acts and decrees. It is, perhaps, in this capacity that we are to suppose that Haggai claims a place in the Grand Council of the Royal Arch.

Zerubbabel, assisted by these advisers, proceeded to arrange his followers in such a form as would enable them most safely and expeditiously to traverse the long and dangerous road from Babylon to Jerusalem, which latter place they reached after a journey of four months, on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of June, 535 years before the birth of Christ.

The first object of the Jewish leader was, we may well suppose, to provide the means of shelter for the people who accompanied him. We are irresistibly led to the conclusion that for this purpose it was found necessary to erect tents for their temporary dwelling. Extensive and populous as was Jerusalem at the commencement of the captivity, after the ruthless devastation of its unsparing conqueror it could hardly have retained sufficient means for the convenient accommodation for the fifty thousand souls who were thus suddenly and unexpectedly brought within its walls. Tents, therefore, afforded rude and temporary dwellings, until, in the course of time, more substantial buildings could be erected.

\* In the English ritual of the Royal Arch, Ezra and Nehemiah are added to the number of scribes.

\*\* In Kitto's Cyclop. Of Bib. Literat. Art. *Scribe*.

\*\*\* Introduction to Crit. Stud. And Knowl. Of Script. Vol iii p. 98.

The next thing was to restore the ancient sacrifices and religious services, and for this purpose to provide a temporary place of worship until the second temple could be completed. Accordingly, a few months after their arrival, they met together at Jerusalem and celebrated the Feast of Trumpets, and a few days subsequently, the Feast of Tabernacles. It was probably the celebration of this latter observance, as well as the necessity and expediency of the measure, that led the Grand Council of leaders to the erection of a temporary tabernacle near the ruins of the ancient temple, the existence of which is so familiar to us from the traditions and ceremonies of the Royal Arch.

Having thus furnished dwellings for the workmen, and a sacred edifice for the celebration of their religious rites, our Masonic traditions inform us that Joshua, the High Priest, Zerubbabel, the King, and Haggai the Scribe, daily sat in council, to devise plans for the workmen and to superintend the construction of the new temple, which, like a phoenix, was to arise from the ashes of the former one.

It is this period of time in the history of second temple, that it is commemorated in the concluding portion of the Royal Arch. The ruins of the ancient temple are begun to be removed, and the foundations of the second are laid, Joshua, Zerubbabel and Haggai are sitting in daily council within the tabernacle; parties of Jews who had not left Babylon with the main body under Zerubbabel, are continually coming up to Jerusalem to assist in rebuilding the house of the Lord.

During this period of laborious activity a circumstance occurred, which is alluded to in the ritual of the Royal Arch. The Samaritans were desirous of assisting the Jews in the construction of the temple, but their propositions were at once rejected by Zerubbabel. To understand the cause of this refusal to receive their cooperation, we must for a moment advert to the history of this people.

The ten tribes who had revolted from Rehoboam, the son of Solomon, and who had chosen Jeroboam for their king, rapidly fell into idolatry, and having selected the town of Samaria for their metropolis, a complete separation was thus effected between the kingdoms of Judah and Israel. Subsequently, the Samaritans were conquered by the Assyrians under Shalmanezzer, who carried the greater part of the inhabitants into captivity, and introduced colonies in their place from Babylon, Cultah, Ava, Hamath and Sepharvaim. These colonists, who assumed the name of Samaritans, brought with them, of course, the idolatrous creed and practices of the region from which they had emigrated. The Samaritans, therefore at the time of the rebuilding of the second temple, were an idolatrous race,\* and as such abhorrent to the Jews. Hence, when they asked permission to assist in the pious work of rebuilding the temple, Zerubbabel, with the rest of the leaders replied, “Ye have nothing to do with us to build a house unto our God; but we ourselves together will build unto the Lord God of Israel, as King Cyrus, the king of Persia has commanded us.\*\*

\* They were not, perhaps, altogether idolators, although idolatry was the predominant religion. The Rev. Dr. Davidson says of them: - “It appears that the people were a mixed race. The greater part of the Israelites had been carried away captive by the Assyrians, including the rich, the strong, and such as was able to bear arms. But the poor and the feeble had been left. The country had not been so entirely depopulated as to possess no Israelite whatever. The dregs of the populace, particularly those who appeared incapable of active service, were not taken away by the victors. With them, therefore, the heathen colonists became incorporated. But the latter were far more numerous than the former, and had all power in their own hands. The remnant of the Israelites was so inconsiderable and insignificant as not to affect, to any important extent, the opinions of the new inhabitants. As the people were a *mixed* race, their religion also assumed a *mixed* character. In it the worship of idols was associated with that of the true God. But apostasy from Jehovah was not universal” See the article *Samaritans in Kitto’s “Cyclopaedia of Biblical Literature.”*

\*\* Ezra, iv. 3.

Hence it was that, to avoid the possibility of those idolatrous Samaritans polluting the holy work by their cooperation, Zerubbabel found it necessary to demand of everyone who offered himself as an assistant in the undertaking, that he should give an accurate of his lineage, and prove himself to have been a descendant (which no Samaritan could be) of those faithful Giblemites who worked at the building of the first temple.

It was while the workmen were engaged in making the necessary excavations for laying the foundations, and while numbers continued to arrive at Jerusalem from Babylon, that three worn and weary sojourners, after plodding on foot over the rough and devious roads between the two cities, offered themselves to the Grand Council as willing participants in the labour of erection. Who these sojourners were, we have no historical means of discovering; but there is a Masonic tradition (entitled, perhaps, to but little weight) that they were Hananiah, Misael and Azariah, three holy men, who are better known to general readers by their Chaldaic names of Shadrach, Mesheck and Abednego, as having been miraculously preserved from the fiery furnace of Nebuchadnezzar.

Their services were accepted, and from their diligent labours resulted that important discovery, the perpetuation and preservation of which constitutes the great end and design of the Royal Arch degree.

This ends the connection of the history of the restoration with that of the Royal Arch. The works were soon after suspended in consequence of difficulties thrown in the way by the Samaritans, and other circumstances occurred to prevent the final completion of the temple for many years subsequent to the important discovery to which we have just alluded. But these details go beyond the Royal Arch, and are to be found in the higher degrees of masonry, such as the Red Cross Knight and the Prince of Jerusalem.

#### Note.

The Three Lectures are extracted from a book entitled “The Book of the Chapter; or Monitorial Instructions in the Degrees of Mark, Past and Most Excellent Master and the Holy Royal Arch.”

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E. Comps and Comps of Prudent Brethren & Philanthic Chapter No.145 London  
in whose company, I have spent many enjoyable hours.