

THE PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS OF THE ROYAL ARCH STORY

BY E. COMP. LESLIE J. BIDDLE, LL.B., P.G.St.B.

A Companion who was well acquainted with the story of the return from the captivity and the building of the second Temple, from the Royal Arch Ritual, and who had never 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 the accession of Cyrus the Great, as King of Persia; that Zerubabel¹, Haggai and Joshua had led the whole of the Children of Israel back across the desert to Jerusalem, that those three leaders ruled over a solemn Sanhedrin which governed the returned exiles and which immediately allocated the principal offices in connection with the rebuilding of the Temple; that Ezra and Nehemiah were attendants upon the Grand Sanhedrin, and that they assisted Zeru-babel, Haggai and Joshua in their task of rebuilding the Temple.

The Bible is the best book there is on Royal Arch Masonry - as it is on so many other important subjects - but it tells the story somewhat differently.

If we break through the smooth surface of this compact piece of Masonry we make some rather remarkable discoveries. The first is that the return from the captivity and the rebuilding of the Temple are two quite separate and distinct stories. The return may have begun shortly after Cyrus the Great, King of Persia, defeated the Babylonians and overwhelmed their city and empire. That return may have been led by Zeru-babel and Jeshua (whom we call Joshua) but it was not until the arrival of the prophet Haggai some 15 years later that the returned exiles took any active steps to rebuild their Temple.

The second fact of interest is that the august Sanhedrin did not exist until some 500 years later (about 79 B.C.) under John Hyrcanus, nor was there any other body over whom Zeru-babel, Haggai and Jeshua could be said to have presided.

Thirdly, neither Ezra nor Nehemiah had any connection either with Zeru-babel, Haggai and Jeshua, with the Grand Sanhedrin, or with the rebuilding of the Temple. Ezra did not even leave Babylon until nearly 60 years after the second Temple was completed and dedicated. Nehemiah followed him to Jerusalem some 12 years later.

These are the bald facts, which can readily be confirmed by a study of the Bible.

Too many people, however, in reading their Bible, do not read it as a book out of which to acquire a knowledge of history, geography and particularly psychology, to be read as a whole and studied in detail. They appear to approach the Bible with so much awe that it might be a dangerous drug, to be absorbed in very small doses. Like the Principal Sojourner in the Royal

¹ The name Zerubbabel is a combination of two words, Zeru, (as in Peru), and Babel. The first part may mean « scattered or dispersed »; it is also a form of the word meaning « seed(ing), plant(ing), sowing » etc. The name may therefore be translated « scattered to Babylon », or « born at Babylon ». There is positively no justification for the « double B » in the middle of the name, and those letters have led to the hideous English pronunciation of the name, as we give it in our R.A. Chapters, Ze-rub-abl. In the original Hebrew, the name is pronounced Zeru- bavel, and in the hope of eliminating the « rub », the Editor (with the Author's permission) has deliberately adopted the unusual spelling Zeru-babel.

Arch story, they grope about in the gloom and lucky indeed are they if they really succeed in finding something valuable which they can bring to the surface.

I therefore propose to tell the stories of Zeru-babel, Haggai, Jeshua, Ezra and Nehemiah as they are recorded in the Bible. I cannot claim anything original for the stories - all I can claim is that they are pictures in mosaic, constructed from fragments taken from various books of the Bible and of the Apocrypha.

The whole story, of course, must be seen against the background of Israel's history as a nation, which began with their release from their Egyptian bondage under Pharaoh. Shortly after that release, the worship of Jehovah was established in a Tabernacle erected by Moses, Aholiab and Bezaleel. That Tabernacle was the central point of every encampment of the Jews during their nomadic period of wandering in the Desert of Sinai. It was a symbol of the fact that the formal worship of Jehovah occupied the central position of Jewish life and thought. During that nomadic period the rules for worship and the offering of sacrifices became the one settled feature of the life of the Jews.

When they had been formed into a nation with a sense of national unity and purpose during their wanderings, they settled in Canaan and became a state under their first king, Saul. His successor, David, made plans to demonstrate the settled character of the new state and the finality of the choice of Canaan as a permanent home of the Jews by erecting a Temple to Jehovah in stone. He chose the site for that Temple on the threshing-floor of Araunah the Jebusite and erected an altar there, which he appointed to be the altar of burnt offering for Israel, instead of the altar of burnt offering at the Tabernacle which, at that time, was kept at the « high place » at Gibeon. From that small beginning Jerusalem became the capital city of the Israelites.

After the death of David, in about 980 B.C., his son Solomon erected upon that site the Temple which was to his Jewish subjects the very symbol of the permanence of their state and their religion. That feeling of permanence, as it grew in the four centuries which followed, encouraged laxity in personal conduct and in religious observance, which aroused the fierce denunciations of the Prophet Jeremiah in the days of Jehoiakim and his son and successor Jehoiachin.

All Jeremiah's warnings were neglected and a sudden attack by the Babylonians, in about 598 B.C., overthrew the state. The King Jehoiachin, his harem, his nobles, the priests and some of the more skilled of his people were carried off from Jerusalem to Babylon. With them were carried away the golden ornaments and sacred vessels of the Temple, (It is this first exile to which belong the prophets Ezekiel and Daniel). The Jewish nation reeled under this shock, and felt that their God had deserted them.

But severe as was this blow to all that the Jews held dear, there was worse to come. Jehoiachin's successor as King, Zedekiah, having sworn allegiance to Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, broke his oath and put himself at the head of a league of the neighbouring kings against the Chaldean power and formed an alliance with Egypt. Ezekiel in Babylon and Jeremiah in Jerusalem, protested in vain at this treachery and folly, which could only result in the severest punishment. The Chaldean forces poured into the country from the north and east and an Egyptian army from the south. Zedekiah was besieged in Jerusalem for 18 months and at length, after the Jews had been weakened by famine and pestilence, the Babylonians made a breach in the walls and over-ran the city. Those Jews who were not slain in the massacre that followed were carried off to Babylon by the cruel conqueror. The whole of the remaining treasures of the

Temple were swept away to adorn the temples or the tables of the Babylonian court. Even the two great pillars which stood at the porchway or entrance of the Temple and which had seemed the very embodiment of stability and durability, were broken to pieces and carried off as mere scrap metal to Babylon, never to return.

It is impossible to over-state the extent of this disaster in its effect upon the minds of the Jewish people. Having been a race of nomads, their settlement in Canaan had come to seem to them to be as permanent as that of the Egyptians in Egypt, whose type of civilization they had copied. Their capital, Jerusalem, had become to them Zion, the Holy City, the centre of their world. Now it had been sacked, burned and ruined and left a desolation. The Temple itself, the palace, and every conspicuous building, with many of the common houses, were burned, and what could not be burned was dismantled. Even the very walls of the city, so essential for its protection in those unsettled days that they constituted its title to be called a walled city instead of a village, were broken down.

But the greatest blow of all was the blow to their pride and their faith. The shock of the fall of the city was felt as a curse from heaven. That a free people had become slaves would have been bad enough; that God's Chosen People should have been rejected by Him took away the very meaning of their existence as a people.

To appreciate and understand what was the impact of this catastrophe upon the mind of a Jew who witnessed the disaster one should read the Book of Lamentations (attributed to the Prophet Jeremiah, although the Hebrew version is anonymous). Nothing could be more impressive than the fervid passionate grief of one who has himself suffered the horrors he paints, and the indignation which he feels towards those who were responsible for them. And most striking of all is the fact that all these disasters are God's punishment upon this guilty people. (Lamentations 11, 5-7):

« The Lord is become as an enemy, He hath swallowed up Israel; He hath swallowed up all her palaces, He hath destroyed his strongholds, and He hath multiplied in the daughter of Judah mourning and lamentation. And He hath violently taken away his tabernacle as if it were of a garden; He hath destroyed his place of assembly: The Lord hath caused solemn assembly and sabbath to be forgotten in Zion, and hath despised in the indignation of His anger the king and the priest. The Lord hath cast off His altar, He hath abhorred His sanctuary. »

That a Jew of such deep piety should write of Jehovah as the enemy of His people shows clearly how deep was his shocked amazement and his spiritual abasement. From his very soul comes his final cry - (Lamentations V, 20-22):-

« Wherefore dost thou forget us for ever, and forsake us so long time ? Turn thou us unto Thee O Lord, and we shall be turned; renew our days as of old. But Thou hast utterly rejected us; Thou art very wroth against us. »

And in that very cry we may discern the germ of the idea and the ideal which sustained the Israelites during the bitter years of the Exile, the idea that God would in His good time restore all that He had taken away. That idea was fostered by Jeremiah, who wrote a letter (Jer. XXIX, 1-14), which he sent from Jerusalem to the exiles in Babylon, prophesying that after 70 years at Babylon their captivity would end and the Lord would gather them together and would bring them back once more to their own country. The exiles remembered that it was Jeremiah who had foretold the disaster which would befall their people, that he had warned them that their city and country would be made desolate and that they would serve the King of Babylon for 70 years.

They also remembered that Jeremiah had said « And it shall come to pass when 70 years are accomplished, that I will punish the King of Babylon, and that nation, saith the Lord, for their iniquity, and the land of the Chaldeans; and will make it perpetual desolation. »

So the exiles took hope again, and fixed their gaze on a time, seventy years thence, when God's wrath would be exhausted, and his fury accomplished, because Israel would have worked out her period of punishment for her sins.

The great Book of Isaiah is really two quite separate and distinct books, belonging to two quite separate and distinct periods and written by two entirely different individuals. The first of these books, which may have been written by Isaiah himself, was probably written some 80 to 100 years before the first fall of Jerusalem (Say, about B.C. 700). In that book Isaiah, the princely prophet of Jerusalem, talks with King Hezekiah. He denounces the sins of Israel and foretells the coming doom. His message is summed up in the sentence:-

« If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land, but if ye refuse and rebel, ye shall be devoured with the sword ». (Is. 1, 19).

The book comes to an end in chapter 39, in which we are told how King Hezekiah showed his treasures to the Babylonian ambassadors and how Isaiah foretold that all those treasures should be carried away to Babylon and that the King's sons should be carried into captivity.

The second book commences with chapter 40 and those great words of promise to the exiles in Babylon:-

« Comfort ye, Comfort ye my people, saith your God: speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned, for she has received of the Lord's hand double for all her sins ».

Only a chapter-heading separates chapter 39 from chapter 40 but one recognizes that we have passed over 150 years, and are reaching the end of the Exile.

In chapter 41, verse 25, he says:-

« I have raised up one from the north, and he shall come; from the rising of the sun shall he call upon my name; and he shall come upon princes as upon mortar, and as the potter treadeth clay ».

This seems to refer to Cyrus, after the union of the Medes with the Persians in about B.C. 549, and a little over ten years before the end of the captivity. Cyrus was then pursuing his career of conquest in the north and north-west, which culminated in the overthrow of Babylon in B.C. 538.

The name of the author is unknown, and he is usually referred to as « Deutero- Isaiah » or the Evangelical Prophet ». His message is full of the great Evangelical truth - Evangelical in its literal sense and true to the depths of human nature - that nations and individuals alike can leave their past behind them, and start afresh in the race of duty. This is of peculiarly historical significance as the keynote of that period at the end of the Exile when Israel was about to make a new beginning. When he says- (Is. XL, 3):-

« The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain. »

We remember immediately the voice of John the Baptist six hundred years later, inaugurating another new epoch and preparing the way for another vaster revolution in nations and in

churches. Then also was it shown that Divine progress demanded the reduction of pride and the exaltation of humility, the simplification of the tortuous and the softening of the angular and the harsh.

Jew and Christian owe a tremendous debt to the Deutero-Isaiah. To the Christian he is the prophet who was able so accurately to foretell and describe the Messiah, the suffering and triumphant Servant of Jehovah. To the exiled Jew in Babylon, he gave encouragement and inspiration, and a firm belief in Israel's destiny as God's Chosen People. There were many among the exiles upon whom the promise of Jeremiah had produced no impression, who were content to remain where they were, who had no high aspirations for the future. There were others who, though they were ready to quit Babylon if the opportunity should offer, were despondent, over-awed by the power and the magnificence of the great imperial city. To these and to all the exiles the prophet brought a new idea of God, and of Israel as the Servant of Jehovah, consecrated to his service.

It is to the Deutero-Isaiah that the exiles owed the fact that those who returned to Jerusalem had a very different conception of Jehovah and his relation to Man in general, and the Jewish people in particular, than that held by the Jews who were carried into captivity. Of that great change in religious values they were probably not conscious at the time, and they would themselves have felt that his great message was that the release of the captives would be effected by Cyrus, whom Jehovah had appointed to overthrow Babylon.

It may therefore be imagined that as Cyrus by steps brought under his sway, by policy or war, the large and vigorous nations of the Medes and the Persians, overthrew the Lydian kingdom and subjugated Asia Minor, the Jewish exiles in Babylon grew more and more excited. Great was their jubilation when Babylon fell and Cyrus became its ruler. It is significant that the Jews regarded the victory of Cyrus as a foregone conclusion, and that the Jewish chronicler records the decree of Cyrus releasing the Jews in these words (II Chronicles XXXVI, 22- 23):-

« Now in the first year of Cyrus, King of Persia (that the word of the Lord spoken by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished) the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus, King of Persia, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and put it also in writing, saying, Thus saith - Cyrus, King of Persia, All the kingdoms of the earth hath the Lord God of Heaven given me; and he hath charged me to build him an house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah ».

These verses are repeated almost exactly in the Book of Ezra, but the facts stated are not supported by the contemporary records and the accounts by non- Jewish authors. From these it seems clear that Cyrus on entering Babylon was careful to do homage to the Babylonian Gods and had himself proclaimed as « the servant of Bel-Merodach » (or Marduk). He says nothing in his proclamation of freeing the Jews, or any of the other tribes held captive on Babylonian soil, but it would have been a wise and statesman-like course to have taken, since it would have helped to bind those subject peoples more closely to him. It would perhaps be convenient at this point to remark that the community which returned to Jerusalem was no longer a sovereign people, a nation in the full sense of the word, but only a Persian colony. For the next two hundred years, Cyrus, Darius, Xerxes and Artaxerxes were to exercise the influence which in earlier times had been exercised by the Kings of Israel, and the Persian Governor became their immediate local ruler. He was known as « the Tirshatha » (Ezra 11, 63) or « the Pasha », that old Assyrian word which has never since died out amongst the governments of the East.

When Cyrus gave permission for the exiles to return to Jerusalem, only some 42,000 took advantage of the opportunity to take part in the organized trek across the desert. Those who had been transplanted from the north of Palestine in the Assyrian captivity never returned at all, or only in small numbers. Of those who had been transported to Babylon and become settled in those rich plains and in that splendid city, many were quite content to remain. Some of them held high places in the Persian court; others remained as members of that great Babylonian colony of Jews which caused Mesopotamia to become as it were a second Holy Land, and round which were planted the tombs, real or supposed, of the three great Jewish saints of this epoch, Ezekiel, Daniel and Ezra.

Still there were 42,000 who listened to the call to return to Jerusalem, together with some 7,000 slaves. Amongst these was the acknowledged head of the community, the Tirshatha or Governor of Judah appointed by Cyrus, the grandson of the beloved and lamented King Jehoiachin, last direct heir of the house of David and Josiah. He was the son of Shealtiel or Salathiel, who bore the trace of his Babylonian birthplace in his two Chaldaean names, Zerubabel « the Babel-born » and Sheshbazzar or Sarabazzar. Next to him was Jeshua (or Joshua) the son of Josedek, the High Priest who had been carried into exile with Zedekiah and shared his imprisonment. Next to them in rank and their elder in years was Seriaiah the priest, the son of Hilkiah.

We have no information as to whether the exiles had any adventures during their long journey across the desert, which took them four months. Considering that they had to take with them all their tents and their tools and personal goods and much of their food for the whole journey, and that they had no vehicles of any kind and only about 8,000 beasts of burden for 50,000 people, the prospect of crossing the desert may well have filled the minds of the exiles with terror. But they won through at last, and reached their goal, Jerusalem, which they called by the name of « the Holy City » or eir ha-kodesh in Hebrew. It is interesting to note that even today its name in Arabic is « el Kuds ».

The one object which had filled the minds of the exiles—the one object for which they believed that their return had been permitted by the Persian king, was « the building of the house of the Lord, the God of Israel, which is in Jerusalem ». It was the chief mission of Zeru-babel, and shortly after his arrival in Jerusalem the first step was taken towards the erection of the second Temple by the erection of an altar upon the place formerly occupied by the Temple of Solomon. As the altar which David erected on the threshing-floor of Araunah long preceded the erection of Solomon's Temple, so Zeru-babel's altar was erected before any attempt was made to erect the walls or even to lay the foundations of the new Temple.

The morning and evening sacrifices were resumed, the Feast of Tabernacles observed and afterwards the other feasts. Next Zeru-babel laid the foundation stone of the Temple and began the building. Immediately, opposition arose from two directions. The people who had been left in the land from the very beginning claimed a right to it so that the exiles found difficulty in getting fertile land to till, which would ensure a supply of food. Next, we are told:-

« They weakened the hands of the people of Judah (that is to say, the returned exiles) intimidated them from building, and hired counsellors against them all the days of Cyrus, even until the reign of Darius ».

Thus from the very foundation of the new Temple we have faction against faction intriguing with their foreign rulers, as they did right down to the destruction of the city under Titus.

The second source of hostility was also one which continued for centuries. The Samaritans, who claimed to have worshipped Jehovah since the days of Esar-haddon, King of Assyria, tried to claim the right to a share in the building of the Temple. It is, of course, a story which has been repeated again and again, in modern times. First the natural desire of an estranged population, heretical though they might be, to partake in a glorious national work; then the rude refusal to admit their co-operation; then the fierce recriminations of the excluded party and the determination to frustrate the good work in which they cannot share. Each alike, and all their successors, deserve the rebuke which had been anticipated by the Evangelical Prophet, Deutero-Isaiah, when in his ideal glorification of Jerusalem, he described that its walls should be built, not by its own children, but by the sons of strangers and that its gates should not be rigidly closed, but should be open continually, and be shut neither day nor night.

In these miserable accusations and counter-accusations, carried on before the Princes who successively mounted the throne of Persia, Cyrus, Cambyses and Smerdis, twelve precious years were wasted. At length Darius, the son of Hystaspes, came to the throne, and like a second Cyrus, gave a new wave of encouragement to the hard-pressed community at Jerusalem. At the same time there appeared two Prophets in Jerusalem who had made the long journey from Babylon, minor prophets, it may be, but fired by the true prophetic zeal, Haggai and Zechariah.

Haggai was an old man who appears to have belonged to that older generation which had wept over the contrast between the First Temple and the Second. He claimed a title which no prophet had ever assumed before, « The Lord's Messenger ».

Deutero-Isaiah had depicted Jehovah manifesting His glory to Israel, gathering them from all quarters, making a road for them through the desert, leading them like a shepherd to their home, renewing His Covenant with them, pouring His Spirit upon them, beginning for them a light to lighten the Gentiles, the bearers of His Salvation to the ends of the earth. The opposition which the returned exiles had received from the local inhabitants and the Samaritans; their original poverty followed by failure of the crops on the poor soil: the sharp contrast between their grandparents' idyllic description of Canaan as a land flowing with milk and honey and the actual hard realities of the situation: even these were as nothing to their disappointment that Jehovah did not vouchsafe them a sign that they were his Chosen People.

Haggai came to these discouraged, frustrated people as the Great Encourager. He took up with enthusiasm the task of strengthening the weak hands, saying to those who were of a fearful heart, « Be strong, fear not ». The recurring message which he brought was-« I am with you, saith the Lord of Hosts » and by repeating it again and again he communicated to Israel his own indomitable faith and unquenchable hope. He was not prepared to accept any excuses about the obstructions caused by hostile tribes or captious Samaritans. He blamed his own countrymen for their apathy and poured fierce rebukes and scornful words upon them. There were some who insisted that only 68 years had elapsed since the Captivity and, because the old prophecy foretold a Captivity of 70 years, said that the time had not come yet to rebuild the Temple. « This people say, The time is not come for the Lord's House to be built ». To which the prophet indignantly replied - « Is it time for you to dwell in your panelled houses while the Temple lies waste? »

Zechariah's appearance and prophecies coincided with those of Haggai in point of time, but were of a very different form. He must have been quite a young man, being the grandson of one of the returning exiles. He belonged to the priestly tribe and was thus remarkable as an example of the union of the two functions of prophet and priest. Possibly by reason of this dual viewpoint his

prophecy is in the form of a series of eight visions and ten oracles which foretell Jerusalem as restored with fullness of old folk and children in its streets.

The simple practical approach of Haggai and the florid and visionary approach of Zechariah combined to inspire the inhabitants of Jerusalem under Zeru-babel and Jeshua, to work with a will until within five years the second Temple was completed and dedicated (B.C. 515). There is a Jewish legend that Zeru-babel returned to Babylon in order to appeal to Darius for help and that he died there; certainly there is no further mention of him in the story of the second Temple.

But it is recorded that Darius the King made a decree that not only should all the sacred gold and silver vessels of the first Temple be restored, but that the expenses of building the second Temple should be borne by the Persian treasury, together with the expenses of the burnt offerings day by day. And there the story of the building of the second Temple really ends.

Some sixty years later (about B.C. 458) in the reign of Artaxerxes, King of Persia, Ezra the Scribe, a descendant of Saraiah, the priest who had accompanied Zeru-babel and Jeshua on the first return from exile eighty years before, went up from Babylon to Jerusalem with another band of returned exiles.

On arriving at Jerusalem he found the inhabitants had become so lax in their worship and so selfish in their lives that there was almost anarchy both in religion and in civic affairs. The priests neglected the more spiritual of their duties: the laity cheapened their sacrifices and withheld their tithes: the Sabbath was abused: the pilgrimages to Zion fell off: Jews divorced their wives in order to marry the heathen. Sorcery, perjury, oppression of the poor, shedding of innocent blood, with a general covetousness and envy of the rich, are the sins charged against the community.

Ezra was struck with horror and astonishment when he discovered the true state of affairs, and he immediately entered on a great work of reform which gave a new and lasting spirit to the Jewish people for generations to come.

A blank of thirteen years now intervenes in the history of Ezra and the people of Jerusalem. When we hear of them again, it is in the twentieth year of Artaxerxes (B.C. 446) when Nehemiah, a Babylonian Jew and the favoured cup-bearer of Artaxerxes, asked the king's permission to revisit his native city and to repair its ruined walls. He seems to have been appointed Tirshatha or Governor of Judah and to have been given power, in the King's name, to requisition such timber as might be required for the gates. With great organizing skill he completed the building of the walls in 52 days. It is proudly recorded of Nehemiah himself, his slaves and his Persian bodyguard, that during the whole of that time not one of them put off their clothes. Where our ritual refers to « with trowel in hand and sword by their side » it is this incident of the building of the walls that we commemorate, and NOT the building of the second Temple.

Ezra and Nehemiah, therefore, are the two great restorers of Jerusalem. Ezra, the aged scribe reformed the religious life by teaching and enforcing the Mosaic Law. Nehemiah, the young layman, half warrior, half statesman, fortified the city and gave it a good system of municipal government. It is not the only time that the architect or the engineer has been the best colleague of the reformer or the theologian. Ezra and Nehemiah are the very embodiments of that quality by which the Jewish race has maintained its place before the judgment Seat of God and of history - impenetrable toughness and persistency.

These then, are the essential elements of our Royal Arch story, as it unfolds against the whole background of Jewish history which preceded it.