



Provincial Grand Chapter of Warwickshire

Traditional History of the Royal Arch

The 'traditional history' in the Royal Arch is far from straightforward and revolves around an ancient legend describing the accidental discovery of an underground chamber or crypt on the site in Jerusalem where King Solomon's Temple formerly stood and the 'bringing to light' of certain things found within it.

It is on this legend, combined with the biblical record of the return of the Hebrews from their exile in Babylon, linked to the building of the second Temple in Jerusalem, that our current ritual is devised. The original magnificent Temple built and very lavishly furnished by King Solomon did not have a long life. Solomon's kingdom was surrounded by pagan peoples. Even the Israelites themselves tended at times to fall into idolatry. In fact ten of the twelve tribes broke away soon after Solomon's death to form the independent kingdom of Samaria. The two faithful tribes of Judah and Benjamin remained in the mountain stronghold of Jerusalem.

The land of Judea was then, as now, a very turbulent area and was often ravaged in the long wars between the Assyrians and the Egyptians. In the fifth year of Rehoboam's reign the Egyptians ravaged Jerusalem and removed all the gold from the Temple. Then in the year 722 BC, the kingdom of Samaria fell, Israel became an Assyrian Province and the ten tribes were taken into captivity. In tribute to the conquerors the Temple at Jerusalem was restored and refurnished.

What appeared to be the end of both Jerusalem and its Temple came in 586 BC when Nebuchadnezzar, who was founding his Babylonian empire, ordered the destruction of Jerusalem. The Temple treasures were again stolen and the two faithful tribes, Judah and Benjamin were carried off to Babylon. In Babylon the exiled Hebrews lived in small colonies and although they had no temple, they were able to form worshipping congregations which kept alive their love of their homeland, Judea and their faith in God. Their plight is described in the emotional words of Psalm 137 – "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea we wept when we remembered Zion..... etc".

About seventy years after their exile, Cyrus the King of Persia, conquered Babylon and it was he, who for some unknown reason, issued an edict permitting the exiles to return to Israel, inviting the two faithful tribes to rebuild the city and Temple at Jerusalem and promising to restore the riches carried off some seventy years previously. This invitation was not at first welcomed or accepted, as most of the Israelites, having been born in exile, had never seen the land of Israel and it was only a small group who returned and started the reconstruction work around 537 BC. Seventeen years later there came a much larger contingent led by Zerubbabel who were mortified to find that they could occupy only the ruins in the immediate vicinity of Jerusalem as tribes of mixed blood had moved into Judea during the years of exile.

Under Zerubbabel the Governor, Joshua the High Priest and the Prophets Haggai and Zachariah, the second Temple was built and dedicated to the worship of God in 516 BC. Haggai the Prophet had been born in Babylon and is believed to have travelled to Judea with Zerubbabel. It was he who had the immediate task of exhorting the Hebrews to finish the rebuilding of the Temple, work in which there had been a break of about fourteen years owing to the hostile actions of the neighbouring tribes.

He assured them that "the glory of this latter house shall be greater than that of the former" – a difficult prophecy inasmuch as the second Temple could not compare in its richness with the first one. The history of the period is written in the Book of Ezra, part of which some believe was written by Haggai.

But all was not well. As the years passed the priests, becoming careless and corrupt, neglected the Temple services. Some fifty eight years after the completion of the Temple Ezra arrived in Jerusalem and immediately set about reforming and purifying the priesthood. Fourteen years later Artaxerxes of Persia allowed Nehemiah, his aristocratic Jewish courtier and cup bearer, to go to Jerusalem with the status of Governor. Under Nehemiah the Hebrews rebuilt the broken walls of the city in the face of the fierce hostility of the Samaritans, who were suffering under a grievance, for they had professed themselves as willing to assist the returned exiles to rebuild the Temple, but had been spurned by the two faithful tribes, who

regarded them, in spite of their (largely) Jewish blood, as foreigners. All through the rebuilding of the Temple and the walls of the city the Hebrews had to reckon with the hostile Samaritans, but they are reputed to have rebuilt the city walls in fifty-two days in spite of the opposition. Their valour is recorded in the Book of Nehemiah iv, 17-18. It is this text that the ritual renders "with trowel in hand and sword at side".

The above is a highly condensed story of the rebuilding of the second Temple which, combined with the legend of the vault, provides the background for the current Royal Arch ritual. It does however contain some historical inconsistencies: In the ritual story three great men – Zerubbabel, Joshua and Haggai – are closely associated with the rebuilding of the Temple during the reign of Cyrus, but actually it was Zerubbabel who travelled from Babylon to Jerusalem, and when they did collaborate it must have been in a later time, that of Darius.

With Haggai was Zachariah, who is not mentioned in our ritual, but these two were co-workers with Zerubbabel. In the ritual Ezra and Nehemiah are associated. But this is hardly possible as Ezra came to Jerusalem probably seventy years later than Zerubbabel, while Nehemiah did not arrive until thirteen years later still. A period of eighty years therefore separated Zerubbabel on the one hand and Ezra and Nehemiah on the other and their work is recorded in the Bible as rebuilding of the city walls, not the walls of the Temple.

The Sojourners who travelled by permission of Cyrus apparently did not arrive until Darius was on the throne, and in the ritual they make their report to the Sanhedrin, which is unlikely to have been in existence in Zerubbabel's day.

The late E. Comp. J Heron Lepper – Librarian and Curator of the Grand Lodge of England (1943 – 1952) – sums up the Royal Arch ritual with the following words: *"Our rite presents drama as distinguished from mere spectacle; induces reflection on the meaning of life and its purposes; illustrates the most besetting passion of mankind, the desire for complete knowledge..... in short, its phrasing and symbolism are designed to appeal to the spirit and intellect of each one of us."*

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