

### From Babylon

When our First Principal requested me to give a short paper to fill a space in our February meeting I said yes, thinking that a paper I gave to Avon Chapter last year would fill the requirement, but examination of that paper entitled 'From Babylon, ME.' based on a chapter in Richard Sandbach's book 'Understanding the Royal Arch' proved to be too long and had a statement to the effect that the words 'From Babylon ME' indicated a return from a concentration camp. It was that statement which caused me to have a look at Babylon.

Now looking at the return from exile I found that the people returning were sometimes referred to as people, or Jews, or Israelites, or Judaites. This made me wonder who went into exile.

Well Jacob was called Israel, he had 12 sons which became the 12 tribes of Israel. The 12 tribes were led out of Egypt by Moses and after 40 years in the wilderness they finally reached the plain of Moab, east of the Jordan river. Joshua succeeded Moses and led the tribes across the Jordan into Canaan, where they took possession of the land, over a period of time, dividing the land between themselves in varying amounts as expansion allowed, or should I say as the native opposition allowed. This opposition was mainly from Philistines and this led to a king of all Israel being appointed namely Saul, followed by David and then Solomon. When Solomon died this Israelite monarchy split into two rival monarchies—a Northern kingdom of 10 tribes and a Southern kingdom made up of the two remaining tribes of Judah and Benjamin. These two kingdoms existed side by side for two centuries, sometimes at war with each other sometimes at peace until the Northern kingdom was conquered by Assyria and its territory annexed by that great empire in 722 BC. The other two tribes had now called themselves the Kingdom of Judah and they also fell under Assyrian domination but they maintained political identity for over a century until it fell to the Babylonians in 587/5 BC.

So it is only the Judahs who were exiled and not all at once.

At this stage it is necessary to have a look at the city of Jerusalem. The original city was on the southern extension of the eastern hill, known as Ophel which has been excavated principally by Kathleen Kenyon. Scattered pottery attests occupation from the third millennium BC and the site was defended by a heavy wall from about 1800 BC.

After the Israelite conquest the territory of Jerusalem was absorbed by the tribe of Benjamin, but the city of the Jebusites with its mixed population of Amorites and Hittites was left alone. It thus served David's need for a capital independent of the 12 tribes. He took it over c1000 BC and made it an effective centre by bringing into it the arc of the covenant. In order to house the arc David bought a threshing floor to the north of the city where Solomon built the first Temple which he linked to the city by a palace effectively doubling the size of the Jebusite city.

Wall-water shafts-tunnels.



Jehoiachim was King of Judah from 608 - 598 and at the start of his reign he owed allegiance to Egypt in an Egypt/Assyrian alliance but after the Babylonians won crushing victories at Carchemish and Hamath in 605 BC He diplomatically changed his allegiance to the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar; however when Nebuchadnezzar failed to invade Egypt in 601 BC he changed sides again but at the end of 598 BC the Babylonian army arrived at the gates of Jerusalem. The city surrendered to the Babylonians in March 597 BC and the new king Jehoiachin had a very short reign of 1 year he was then deported to Babylon along with many leading citizens. Mattaniah his uncle succeeded to the throne with the name Zedekiah. Egypt grew stronger and there was another rebellion. Jerusalem was besieged for 2 years and finally fell in 586 BC. Zedekiah escaped but was caught by the Babylonians near Jericho, his sons were executed and he had his eyes put out before being deported to Babylon. At this stage the Temple was destroyed and the city razed to the ground. The period of the exile had begun. Nebuchadnezzar thought that destruction of the Temple would remove the Judeans religion, and bring them to worship Babylonian idols. He did not understand that the God of the Judeans was not a visible God, who would still be with them at all times.

Now just as the exile was in stages so the return to Jerusalem was in stages. The basic idea of Deportation used by the Assyrians and the Babylonians was a fundamental part of their foreign policy. The resettlement of whole communities far away from their original homes was a powerful method of demonstrating the Empires might. It was hoped that leaders would lose their influence and the presence of families would encourage them to remain.

What was Babylon like under Nebuchadnezzar? well there is no doubt that it must have been very impressive, the restoration by Nebuchadnezzar had given the city many fine streets and some houses were 3 or 4 stories high. It straddled the river Tigris across which there were a number of bridges. The main street, the great processional way was dedicated to the principal god, Marduk or Bel and led to his great Temple in which the bulk of the Treasures and sacred vessels from the Temple at Jerusalem were stored. It was then a very highly civilized city, well laid out and very wealthy. Its walls were extensive, some 40 miles long it has been suggested. Herodotus a Greek historian says they were 300 feet high (200 cubits) and 70 feet wide (50 cubits). Mary Reynaud describes them in fact as 400 feet high and 180 feet thick.

These walls did not prove of value when Cyrus the Persian acquired the city without even a siege in 539 BC. Many of the exiles acquired high office, Daniel, Zerubbabel and Nehemiah are mentioned in this capacity. Cyrus and his successors were in general less harshly disposed towards captive peoples and were tolerant in matters of religious differences. Cyrus allowed those who wished to return to Jerusalem to go. His decree that the Temple in Jerusalem be rebuilt and the stolen items returned was in keeping with his tolerant and generous policy towards his subjects. In the years after the decree some Exiles trickled back to the land but many more stayed behind.



The uncertainty of the return, the prosperity of the Judeans in Babylon and fading memories of the land itself may explain why only relatively few took the opportunity to return. A first group probably returned in about 538/7 BC under Sheshbazzar, a prince of Judah. There were problems with present occupants of the land and the rebuilding of the Temple ceased soon after the new foundations were laid. A second wave of exiles returned in 520 BC, under Sheshbazzar's nephew Zerubbabel, heir apparent of Judah. The Prophets Haggai and Zechariah - not mentioned in our ritual - urged a restart of the rebuilding and the second Temple as it became known was completed 4 years later and consecrated in 515 BC. Ezra and Nehemiah continued to rebuild and reorganize Jerusalem.

Now it may be that I have painted a very glossy picture of Babylon and I am sure that John will remind me of Psalm 137 - By the waters of Babylon where we sat down and wept -. Well the fact remains that the Majority stayed in Babylon.

After consideration of this Biblical history it may be interesting to look at our ritual which is set in Jerusalem immediately after the return from Babylon, when Zerubbabel is preparing to rebuild the temple and city. Our Chapter represents the Grand Sanhedrin, whose deliberations are interrupted by the arrival of three Sojourners from Babylon who ask to be permitted to assist in the rebuilding work. They are set to clear the grounds of the former Temple to receive the foundations of the new Temple, in doing so they discover a hidden vault which they break open and enter. Inside the PS discovers a scroll - the long lost volume of the sacred law - and a pedestal on which are engraven the initials of the Three Grand Masters who built the original Temple. They report their discoveries to the Sanhedrin and are rewarded by being constituted members of the Chapter.

Now as in the Craft the Royal Arch ritual is an allegory. The three Principals and the two Scribes are Biblical characters but historically could not be in Jerusalem at the same time.

As you will have noted I have used the term Judeans for the people who were exiled and who returned to Jerusalem, this I consider to be correct. Israel is used by Biblical historians in different ways :-

First as the name of Jacob

or in reference to the 12 Tribes - The children of Israel

or for the united Monarchy of Saul, David or Solomon.

or for the Northern Kingdom of 10 Tribes after the split of Solomon's Kingdom,

or for the reconstituted nation after the return from exile.

You will see that there is a gap, which is filled by the Judeans; it is they who were exiled and they who returned.

I have also avoided the term 'Jew' which is derived from the Judeans not from the Israelites

I hope I have given you something to think about.