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Province of West Lancashire



"WHOSE NAMES THEY BEAR"

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East Grand Superintendent

of the Province of Suffolk

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Soon after I had been appointed to the position of Grand Scribe Nehemiah, a certain Brother who was not a R.A. Mason but had seen the announcement, approached me with the startling question: "What on earth is, or was, a nehemiah?"

Now, Companions, you smile at that question because you know that he should have said: "*Who* was Nehemiah" rather than "what".

But that question shows up a sad state of ignorance which we ought to put right. So, who was Nehemiah? What sort of a man was he? What did he say? What did he do? Could you answer that? And following on from there, could you give any sort of statement about the lives and activities of Ezra, Joshua, Haggai or Zerubbabel?

Let us try, then, to form a picture of those five most interesting men, and see how they all fit into the story of this sublime degree.

Now the first thing to get absolutely clear is that they were all real people and not fictional characters; we can read a great deal about them in the Old Testament, in the Apocrypha, in the History of Josephus, and in various other writings.

The next thing to notice is,—and this may surprise you, that their history covers nearly a hundred years, and it is highly improbable that Zerubbabel, Haggai and Joshua ever met Ezra or Nehemiah in their lives. Not that this really matters: if one could invent a purely hypothetical example, let us suppose that we wanted to invent a new degree to be called, say, the "British Empire Degree": we might perhaps have three Principals to be called by the names of Wellington, Nelson and Disraeli, and then add a couple of Scribes called Churchill and Lloyd George. Historically it would be hopelessly inaccurate, but it would in no way invalidate the import and teaching of the degree itself.

So, then, let us briefly reconstruct the history of Israel and see how our Royal Arch Principals and Scribes fit into it.

Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon overcame the kingdom of Judah in the year 587 B.C. A graphic description is given in the second Book of Kings: The city of Jerusalem was besieged for two years and the inhabitants suffered from complete starvation. Then, "the city was broken up, and all the men of war fled by night". The Babylonian army caught many of them, including Zedekiah the king; they bound him with fetters of brass, slew his sons before his eyes, then blinded him and carried him away captive to Babylon.

Then came Nebuzaradan, captain of the guard—he is the one we call "the Babylonish general"—and he burnt the House of the Lord with fire, and broke down the walls of Jerusalem. He took

away the rest of the people captive, leaving only the poorest of them to be vinedressers and husbandmen.

Jerusalem was now in ruins; all except those who basely fled, and those left behind to till the ground were taken into exile, and by the waters of Babylon they sat down and wept.

The prophet Jeremiah had forecast an exile of 70 years, and indeed it was exactly 70 years from the destruction of the first Temple to the dedication of the second; but the return from exile had started a little earlier; and so we find that just 50 years of exile had been completed when the Persian Empire overcame Babylon and King Cyrus came to the throne.

Cyrus was an enlightened monarch, years ahead of his time. Most emperors, like Nebuchadnezzar, ruled by fear and force; Cyrus believed in toleration and trust. He realised that people need their own religion and their own laws in order to live peaceably; and so he allowed the people, a few at a time, to return to the land of Judah, with permission to rebuild their Temple. He restored to them the golden treasures that Nebuchadnezzar had looted, and encouraged them in every possible way.

The leader of the returned exiles was a young man who had been born in captivity; he is sometimes referred to in the Bible by his Persian name of Sheshbazzar, but is usually known to us by his Hebrew name, Zerubbabel, which literally means "Begotten in Babylon". He is described as "Prince of Judah" in direct line of the house of David and the legal claimant to the throne. With the authority of Cyrus, he led the advance party to Jerusalem, taking with him the sacred vessels, building materials including cedars of Lebanon, together with masons and carpenters for the work.

Zerubbabel is well documented. He appears in five different Books of the Old Testament, his name is in the genealogies of two of the Gospels in the New Testament, and there is a long account of him in the apocryphal Books of Esdras. In one of these there is a rather lovely description of Zerubbabel's thanksgiving as he set out for Jerusalem:

(Esdras 4.38): "Now when this young man was gone forth, he lifted up his face to heaven towards Jerusalem, and praised the King of heaven, and said, From thee cometh victory, from thee cometh wisdom, and thine is the glory, and I am thy servant. Blessed art thou, who hast given me wisdom: for to thee I give thanks, O Lord of our fathers."

With Zerubbabel there travelled priests, led by Joshua who was also probably born in captivity in Babylon, whither his father Josedech had been taken when young. Joshua was the first High Priest of the third series, descended from the priests of Solomon's time, and an ancestor of fourteen future High Priests. A man of

earnest piety, patriotism and courage, his first care on reaching Jerusalem was to rebuild the altar and restore the daily sacrifice. Within two years, he and Zerubbabel had cleared the ground and laid the foundation of the second Temple.

(Ezra 3.10-13): "And when the builders laid the foundation of the Temple of the Lord, they set the priests . . . with trumpets, and the Levites . . . with cymbals, to praise the Lord . . . and they sang together. And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid.

"But many of the priests and Levites and chief of the fathers, who were ancient men that had seen the first house, when the foundation of this house was laid before their eyes, wept with a loud voice; and many shouted aloud for joy; so that the people could not discern the noise of the shout of joy from the noise of the weeping of the people: for the people shouted with a loud shout, and the noise was heard afar off."

Then they ran into opposition. The "people of the land", probably including some of those left to till the ground, and even some of those who basely fled, came and claimed a share in the rebuilding. Zerubbabel and Joshua told them in no uncertain tones:

(Ezra 4.3): "Ye have nothing to do with us to build a house for our God; but we ourselves will build unto the Lord God of Israel, as king Cyrus of Persia hath commanded us." So these "people of the land" turned against Zerubbabel and Joshua with a bitter hatred. They hindered the work as much as they could, and wrote letters of complaint to the king of Persia, warning him that Jerusalem had always been a rebellious city, and if once it was rebuilt it would probably not pay toll or tribute and could become a danger.

The result of this was that work on the Temple ceased for about fourteen years. But apparently people went on building their own houses, because in the second year of king Darius—520 B.C.—we suddenly find the prophet Haggai appearing on the scene, and his first words show the state of affairs:

(Haggai 1.2): "Thus speaketh the Lord of Hosts, saying: This people say, The time is not come, the time that the Lord's house should be built. . . . Is it time for you to dwell in your panelled houses, and this house lie waste?" And then comes the great exhortation of Haggai which is so well known to us: "Now be strong, O Zerubbabel, and be strong, O Joshua, and be strong all ye people of the land, saith the Lord, and work."

The exhortation was effective, and they really did work. In four years the Temple was completed, and Zerubbabel who had

laid the foundation also topped out the keystone, in accordance with the word of another prophet, Zechariah, who had said:

(Zech. 4.9): "The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this house, and his hands shall also finish it." (6.13). He shall build the Temple of the Lord and he shall bear the glory, and shall sit and rule upon his throne; and Joshua shall be a priest upon his throne: and the counsel of peace shall be between them both."

Now in the apocryphal Book of Esdras, and in the History of Josephus, there is an entirely different account of the rise of Zerubbabel which we must mention. Here (1 Esdras 4) he did not go to Jerusalem in the days of Cyrus, but first appears as one of three young men who were the bodyguard of king Darius.

One sleepless night the king amused himself by asking his bodyguard to write down what is the strongest thing in the world, promising a reward for the best answer.

The first one wrote, "Wine is the strongest."

The second wrote, "The king is strongest."

The third, Zerubbabel, wrote, "Women are strongest, but above all things Truth beareth away the victory".

Next day the king and all the court gathered and each of the three young men was asked to explain his choice. The first talks about the strength of wine which "causeth all men to err, and maketh the mind of the king and of the fatherless child to be all one." The second speaks of the strength of the king who "hath dominion over all" and "all his people and his armies obey him".

Then Zerubbabel gives an amusing account of the power of women over men, even quoting the example of one of the king's own harem who had taken the crown from the king's head and put it on her own head and slapped the king's face. Then, with a quick change of mood, Zerubbabel suddenly becomes serious:

Wine can be wicked, he says, the king can be wicked, women can be wicked, and there is no truth in them. But "Truth endureth and is always strong: it liveth and conquereth for evermore. With her there is no accepting of persons or rewards . . . neither in her judgment is any unrighteousness. She is the strength, kingdom, power and majesty, of all ages. Blessed be the God of Truth. And with that, he held his peace. And all the people shouted and said, Great is Truth, and mighty above all things. Then said the king, Ask what thou wilt, because thou art found wisest". So Zerubbabel asked permission to go to Jerusalem and build the Temple, and his request was granted.

This is probably a much later story, but it is worth having, if only for that wonderful tribute to Truth.

About the prophet Haggai we really know very little except

for his Book in the Bible. It is a very short book, only 38 verses, and consists of various utterances all made in three months of the year 520. They are so scrappy and abbreviated that some scholars have suggested that they may only be a series of headings—a sort of “sermon notes” for his own use when preaching aloud.

It is possible that Haggai was one of those few survivors who had actually seen the first Temple. If so, his book was written when he was a very old man:

“Who is left among you,” he says, “that saw this house in her first glory? And how do ye see it now? Is it not in your eyes in comparison of it as nothing?” That certainly sounds like first-hand experience.

The only other curious little bit of information about Haggai comes in a book of the Lives of the Prophets written many years later. Here it is stated that Haggai was the first man ever to chant “Hallelujah” which is called (according to this book) “The Hymn of Haggai”. Literally it means “Praise ye Jah—the Lord”.

And now we move forward another sixty years in time, to the year 457 B.C. Fortunately we have other means of dating the kings of Persia, and we now find ourselves in the reign of Artaxerxes.

Then it was that (Ezra 7.6) “Ezra went up from Babylon: and he was a ready scribe in the Law of Moses which the Lord God of Israel had given: and the king granted him all his request”.

Ezra is called both priest and scribe in the scriptures, and his coming marked the beginning of a new rule of Law. He took a large company of exiles back with him, with authority to appoint judges and magistrates; and his object was to restore the Law of Moses which he solemnly read to the people, standing (we are told) in a wooden pulpit to do so.

Among his achievements, which you will find in the Book of Ezra, were the institution of government by the sanhedrin, the introduction of synagogue worship, the establishment of the official canon of scriptural books, and the division of the Bible into chapters and verses. He also made strict rules against mixed marriages, in order to preserve the purity of the Hebrew race.

Now, all these things, the Altar, the Temple, the Word and the Law, were still in great danger while Jerusalem lay open and exposed to the attacks of the insidious. The city needed walls; and for those walls it had to wait for the coming of Nehemiah, who is in many ways the most interesting character of all.

We call him a Scribe, but nowhere is he given that description in the Bible. He is generally called the Tirshatha or Governor, and his achievements were military and architectural rather than

secretarial. I suppose we call him a Scribe because he wrote a book; but the Book of Nehemiah in the Bible is much more like an administrator's diary or a general's memoirs. He writes in the first person and tells his own story.

Like all good Masonic rulers, his first office was that of a steward. "I was the king's cup-bearer," he says—the king being that same Artaxerxes who had already sent Ezra's party home twelve years before. Now, in 445 B.C., more than seventy years after the dedication of the second Temple, Nehemiah's cousin Hanani came back from Jerusalem to Persia with news that the city was in a deplorable state, the walls still broken down, the gates burnt, and the people going in fear of their lives.

The news affected Nehemiah so deeply that it must have showed in his face. "I took up wine," he says, "and gave it to the king. And the king said to me, Why is thy countenance sad seeing thou art not sick? This is nothing else but sorrow of heart."

So Nehemiah unburdened himself, and king Artaxerxes gave him leave to go and build the walls, and gave him timber for the gates, and letters of credit, and a commission to appoint Nehemiah governor of Jerusalem.

Nehemiah found the state of Jerusalem even worse than he had feared. Not one wall or gate was intact, and the people of the land round about were doing as they pleased with the countryside. The leaders of this enemy band were Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite, and they represent the beginnings of the race of Samaritans who were to be the enemies of the Jews for many centuries.

After a careful reconnoitre by night, graphically described in his diary, Nehemiah called on the rulers and priests and all the people to help him build up the walls.

At first, Sanballat and Tobiah only laughed and despised him, but as the work progressed they became angry. And (Neh. 4.2) "Sanballat spake before his brethren and the army of Samaria and said, What do these feeble Jews? Will they fortify themselves?

Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of the rubbish which are burned? . . . And they conspired all of them together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to hinder it. Nevertheless we made our prayer unto our God, and set a watch against them day and night."

The wall was now more than half built, and Nehemiah hurried on as fast as he could. (4.17). "And every one with one of his hands wrought in the work, and with the other hand held a weapon. For the builders, every one had his sword girded by his side, and so builded. And he that sounded the trumpet was by me".

Sanballat and Tobiah stormed and raved. Their attacks were beaten off, so they accused Nehemiah of treason and reported him to Artaxerxes. But all to no avail. In fifty-two days the wall was complete, and Jerusalem was safe from attack. With becoming modesty Nehemiah notes in his diary (6.16): "When our enemies heard thereof . . . they were much cast down in their own eyes: for they perceived that this work was wrought of our God".

It is highly appropriate that in our Chapters it is Nehemiah who has charge of the door, and gives reports of those who seek admission, for he was always concerned with security. Listen to his diary memo to the janitors (7.3): "I said unto them, Let not the gates of Jerusalem be opened until the sun be hot, and before sunset let them shut the doors and bar them, and appoint watches of the inhabitants of Jerusalem".

Much more we can learn of Nehemiah from his book of memoirs: his concern that the Sabbath should be properly observed; his generosity in refusing to accept the governor's salary because the people were so poor; his care to entertain sojourners at his table, and so on. But perhaps his character is best summed up by Josephus the historian who wrote of Nehemiah:

"He was a man of good and righteous disposition, and very ambitious to make his own nation happy: and he hath left the walls of Jerusalem as an eternal monument for himself".

To that, I will only add the final words of the Book of Nehemiah—the last brief entry in his diary. It reads: "Remember me, O my God, for good".

Concisions, I have tried to set before you some account of those great originals who are represented in our Chapters by Principals and Scribes, whose names they bear. I hope that this may have given you a new interest in our ritual and in the Scriptures on which it is based.

Here were five men who all returned from the exile of Babylon to become sojourners in their own land. They left the East and came to the West to seek for that which was lost. By the instruction of their predecessors and their own industry they found—the Temple, the Altar, the Word, the Law, and the Security of defence from envy and malice. May their lives and examples teach us so to conduct ourselves in the exile of this life, that we may find our true home in the heavenly Jerusalem, in the presence of Him who was, and is, and is to come, and join in the eternal "Hallelu Jah".