

LECTURE TWO

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.

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 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.

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

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 Pompedita. ***

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.*

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 "Encyclopedic 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.