



Zerubbabel

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All Royal Arch Masons recognize the important role Zerubbabel plays in our ritual, but most of us know extraordinarily little about the man himself. We know our Chapters are "erected to God and dedicated to Zerubbabel" - but who was this man? Unfortunately, the Holy Bible provides scant information about the builder of the Second Temple. What little that is known, taken from our Volume of Sacred Law, is summarized in the following paragraphs.

The Temple that Zerubbabel built in Jerusalem in the sixth century BCE lasted longer than the Temples of Solomon and Herod the Great combined. However, Zerubbabel disappears from the Biblical narrative even before the Second Temple is dedicated. This has fuelled speculation by leading theologians and Biblical scholars that he was possibly executed for leading a messianic movement that would have crowned him king of an independent Jewish nation.

The prophets of his day certainly seemed to have messianic expectations of Zerubbabel as a direct descendant of King David. Haggai said the Jew who helped lead the first wave of his people home from exile in Babylon would be used by Yahweh to destroy other nations:

"On that day, says the Lord of hosts, I will take you, a Zerubbabel to be my servant, the son of Shealtiel, says the Lord, and make you like a signet ring; for I have chosen you, says the Lord of hosts" (Haggai 2:23).

The words "servant," "signet ring," and "chosen", indicate that Zerubbabel was most likely born during Judah's five-decade exile in Babylon. In fact, the name Zerubbabel itself means "seed of Babylon."

Though many leading citizens of Judah were exiled in 597 BCE, most were not taken until Babylon levelled Jerusalem in 587 BCE. Forty-seven years later, the Persians captured Babylon, and, within a year, the Persian king Cyrus II issued a decree allowing the Jews to return home to

"rebuild the house of the Lord, the God of Israel" (Ezra 1 :3).

Cyrus also restored the Temple's treasures the Babylonians had stolen and agreed to help finance the building project.

The decree of 538 BCE was not unique. Cyrus, like Persian kings after him, had a policy of allowing captured people to return home and encouraged their native religions. Ancient non-Biblical sources show that Cyrus also gave money to rebuild temples in Ur and Uruk. Cambyses II, his son, and successor helped finance restoration of the temple at Sais, Egypt. And Darius I, who succeeded Cambyses, won over the priests of Egypt by rebuilding their temple and restoring their incomes.

Zerubbabel was placed in charge of the returning Jews and given the title "Governor of Judah." He allowed the people about 14 months to get settled, build their homes and plant crops. Then, about 536 BCE, the Jews began in earnest to rebuild the Temple. Sometime after they laid the foundation over what is purported to have been Solomon's Temple, opposition arose that slowed the work and finally brought the construction to a 15-year halt. The opposition came from non-Jews in the region, perhaps descendants of settlers the Assyrians had brought in after they crushed the northern kingdom of Israel in 721 BCE as Samaritans living in the area who saw the resurgence of Judah as a political and military threat. Some of those people worshipped Yahweh and asked to help in the building of the Temple.

The response of Zerubbabel and the other leaders was blunt:

"You have nothing to do with us in building a house to our God; just we alone will build to the Lord, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus the king of Persia has commanded us" (Ezra 4:3).

In retaliation, the neighbours harassed the builders to the point of bringing the work to a standstill, where it remained throughout the reign of Cyrus as well as that of his son Cambyses. I

According to another school of thought, Sheshbazzar, possibly, Zerubbabel's uncle and then governor of Judah, led the first returnees in the construction of the Temple. Zerubbabel himself did not arrive until about 521 BCE to oversee the second phase of building.

A year and a half into the reign of the Persian king, Darius, the prophets Haggai and Zechariah convinced Zerubbabel that it was time to finish the job. Haggai told Zerubbabel, then the governor of Judah, and Joshua, the High Priest, that the reason for the people's inadequate harvests, their hunger, thirst and cold was that Yahweh was displeased with them for failing to restore His Holy House (Haggai 1:4).

The Jews resumed construction again

"on the twenty-fourth day of the month, in the sixth month" (Haggai 1: 15).

Once again, neighbouring communities took notice of the project and raised objections, this time expressed to the governor of Syria. He asked who authorized the work. When Zerubbabel and the other Jewish leaders told him the

Persians, the Syrian governor wrote to Darius asking him to confirm it by checking the royal archives.

Darius ordered the royal archives to be searched and found the decree of Cyrus. Then, he not only confirmed what the Jews had said, he ordered the non-Jews to leave the Jews alone and to give them any money from the royal revenues or supplies they needed to complete the Temple. If anyone did not comply, Darius said,

"a beam is to be pulled out of his house, and he shall be impaled upon it" (Ezra 6: 11).

In a subsequent prophecy, Haggai promised that the Second Temple would surpass Solomon's magnificent edifice in splendour as well as being filled with silver and gold. This was not to be.

According to some sources, Zerubbabel's Temple was completed in 516 BCE, about three and a half years after the second effort began. Contrary to ancient legends, Zerubbabel never served as King of Judah. Zerubbabel, presumably the leader of the project, is nowhere mentioned in the details of the Temple's completion and dedication. He disappears from the Bible, except for three New Testament verses that include him in the genealogy of the Christian Master. Yet, this may mean nothing more than that his most memorable contribution to ancient Jewish history had been already recorded, and there was nothing significant left to be recorded.