

Who Was Zerubbabel?

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Often in our ritual, we come across names that are important and merit research and understanding. For the purpose of this short talk, I wanted to learn more about Zerubbabel. Why is he special and why do we dedicate our Royal Arch Chapters to him? He is also mentioned in the Knight Templar Order of the Red Cross, and the Order of DeMolay has an award called the Zerubbabel Key, which is given to Masons who found new Chapters.

Our knowledge of Zerubbabel comes from the Old Testament Books of Ezra, Zechariah, and Haggai. His story begins with his grandfather, King Jeconiah of Judah, who was deposed by King Nebuchadnezzar and exiled to Babylon in 597 BC, together with his son Shealtiel and 3000 other Jews. This is not the same exile that occurred 11 years later, when Nebuchadnezzar sieged and destroyed Jerusalem and sent the remaining Jews to Babylon, as we hear about in the Royal Arch Degree.

While in Babylon, Shealtiel, fathered Zerubbabel, making him of the royal line of the House of David. The Hebrew translation of the name Zerubbabel is "begotten in Babylon." In 538 BC, King Cyrus of Babylon allowed the exiled Jews to return to Jerusalem if they wished and to rebuild the Temple of Israel. One of their leaders was Zerubbabel, who may also have been called by the Babylonian name of Sheshbazzar. He then received from Cyrus the sacred vessels of the Temple and carried them to Jerusalem. Cyrus also sent a letter to the Syrian Governors, in which he informed them of the permission he had given to the Jews, as follows: "I have sent my treasurer and Zerubbabel, the Governor of the Jews, that they may lay the foundations of the Temple." We know through the Principal Sojourner's Lecture of their rough and rugged roads in returning home.

When they arrived, they constructed a tabernacle composed of four veils or apartments, in the last of which Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and Haggai presided. From there, they supervised the work of rebuilding the temple. However, the work was often delayed, and many objections arose to it. The work was even stopped for fifteen years by the successor of King Cyrus due to Samaritan and other complaints.

During this time, supposedly, is when Zerubbabel went back to Babylon and a new ruler, King Darius, held his famous contest where he asked what is the greatest: Wine, the King, or women? After others gave their opinion, Zerubbabel then proclaimed that "Women are the strongest, but above all things Truth beareth away the victory." This earned King Darius' favor, and Zerubbabel was allowed to return to Jerusalem and complete the work of rebuilding the Temple and Holy City. We hear about this contest in both the Allied Masonic Degrees and the Order of the Red Cross.

So, to summarize, why is Zerubbabel important? First, he led the return from exile, restored the altar and daily worship, and rebuilt the Temple. He presided over the remnants of Israel for two decades. He also protected the purity of the Lord's work and worship against opposition, he obeyed the Lord, and ensured the daily needs of the Levites who led in worship. God thought so much of him that he referred to him as His "signet ring" in the Book of Haggai and praised him in the book of Zechariah. He is linked famously with Truth, as contained in the legend of King Darius' contest. So, this is why we call Zerubbabel our signet and truth in Royal Arch Masonry.