

Who was Zerubbabel?

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The name Zerubbabel is of Biblical origin and is believed to mean “seed of Babylon” or roughly “born in Babylon”. He is a prominent figure within the lore of Freemasonry. His rebuilding of the Temple brings together two subjects of special interest to Masons: architecture and religion. He is often referenced in Masonic lore, rites and orders: in the Scottish Rite 15th Degree *Knight of the Sword* or *Knight of the East*, surnamed *Knight Mason the Rose Croix*, and the 16th Degree *Princes of Jerusalem*, in Albert Mackey’s *Royal Arch History in Three Lectures*, and in the Knights Templar *Illustrious Order of the Red Cross*.

But who was Zerubbabel and what is his legacy? To answer those questions, we need to examine the Scriptures in the Books of Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Chronicles.

Zerubbabel was born in Babylon as a Jewish exile and grandson of Jehoiachin King of Judah and thought to be of King David of Israel lineage. Zerubbabel and Sheshbazzar may have been the same person. As Sheshbazzar, the Prince of Judah, he was appointed governor under Cyrus, King of Persia, and as Zerubbabel he was appointed governor under Darius the Great.

All that is known about Zerubbabel is found in the Canonical Books of Zechariah, Haggai and Ezra-Nehemiah. According to these he and Joshua the High Priest led a group of Jew captives from Babylon to Jerusalem in the first year of Cyrus I (generally thought to have been between 538 and 520 BC). They began rebuilding the Second Temple in the second year of Darius I (522 BC). According to the Romano-Jewish author Josephus and the Book of Ezra, Zerubbabel was a friend of Darius I and that he had successfully competed in a contest whose object was to determine what was the strongest thing in the world--wine, kings, women, or truth. Zerubbabel, having demonstrated that truth was the mightiest of all, was called the king's "cousin," and was granted permission to go up to Jerusalem and to build the temple. Zerubbabel was also made a governor of Jerusalem and had official duties as Persian collector of taxes.

Importance of Zerubbabel in Judaism

Zerubbabel’s importance to Judaism is as a historic figure connected to the Temple at Jerusalem and it is this connection which is emphasized most in Biblical sources. The Hebrew faith prior to the Babylonian captivity was centered first around the portable Tabernacle the Israelites carried with them

through the wilderness into the land of Israel, and then later around Solomon's Temple at Jerusalem, both buildings figure prominently in the Old Testament as the centers of worship.

When the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar conquered Israel, they destroyed the Temple at Jerusalem, and with it, the center of worship for the Jews. While the Jews continued to practice their faith while in captivity in Babylon, they did so without a center of worship, and without a clearly defined leadership. That changed with the return of Jews from Babylon to the province of Judah, led by Ezra as the prophet and spiritual leader, Zerubbabel as the political leader. With support and the authority of the Persians, Zerubbabel began the reconstruction of the Second Temple at Jerusalem. Zerubbabel was a critical agent in restoring the faith as it had been before the Babylonian conquest.

The Second Temple would eventually fall into disrepair, until it was restored and largely rebuilt under the rein of Herod the Great, just prior to the Christian era. It was still standing during Jesus' ministry, and as such is mentioned in many places in the New Testament, where it was clearly a center of worship for Jews and Christians alike. It was destroyed by the Romans during the Siege of Jerusalem in 70 AD. With the Temple once again destroyed, Judaism entered a period of crisis regarding its identity and the nature of worship. That crisis was largely resolved through a shift toward worship centered on the home and on the synagogue, with rabbis as the spiritual leaders of the Jewish people. Rabbinical Judaism remains the dominant form of Judaism in the modern era, but the influence of the Temple is still felt in Jewish thought.

Zerubbabel in Prophecy

Zerubbabel's name was mentioned in connection with his role in rebuilding the Second Temple by the prophets of his era. While these relate directly to the rebuilding of the Temple, they can be more broadly read as referring to a future figure who will restore the proper way of worship for the Israelite people.

The Importance of Zerubbabel in Christianity

Considering Zerubbabel's place in history and the prophecies of the Jews, it is important that Zerubbabel and his ancestors have lineage back to King David and are listed in the genealogy of Jesus. Zechariah's prophecies during the reign Darius have connections to the accounts of Jesus given in the New Testament in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke and had direct references to Joshua the High Priest and indirect references to Zerubbabel as the builder of the Temple.

In the Gospels, Jesus directly assumed the role of a builder of temples. Most significantly, Jesus' declaration of his role as the builder of the temple was in response to a challenge to his authority. That connection – between the building of the temple and the kingly authority – can be found in the prophecy of Zechariah, which looked forward to the Messianic figure who would come and complete the work of restoring the faith that had begun with Joshua the High Priest and Zerubbabel.

Zerubbabel in Freemasonry

Although his name is not directly associated with the Symbol Lodge nor Ancient Craft Masonry and its ritual, Zerubbabel is a prominent figure within the lore of Freemasonry. It is interesting that Freemasonry, the champion of Truth and as one of the Craft's founding Grand Principles should be attributed to the story of a contest Zerubbabel and Darius' three bodyguards had about the "strongest thing in the world--wine, kings, women, or truth" as read in the Book of Ezra and the Knights Templar *Illustrious Order of the Red Cross*. Zerubbabel, like that Scottish Rite Twentieth Degree *Illustrious Martyr of the Symbolic Lodge*, is a figure representing Truth.

In the Book of Haggai we read the Signet of Zerubbabel, or more properly the Signet of Truth: "In that day, saith the Lord of Hosts, will I take thee, O Zerubbabel, my servant, the son of Shealtiel, saith the Lord, and will make thee as a signet: for I have chosen thee, saith the Lord of Hosts." The Signet of Zerubbabel is worn by the Royal Arch Captain and represents Zerubbabel's advancement in his progress in attaining truth for which he became the servant of truth, and the signet is the token of his elevation.

Zerubbabel's rebuilding of the Temple directly connects him to the Solomon Temple at Jerusalem and brings together a subject of special interest to Freemasons. From the Scriptures we learn Zerubbabel led a group of Jewish craftsmen to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple on the spot where the Solomon Temple stood, and he brought with him the sacred vessels Nebuchadnezzar carried away when the Solomon Temple was destroyed. And from Albert Mackey's *Royal Arch History in Three Lectures*, we learn three Sojourners found several valuable items in the rubbish of the old Temple and a stone with characters on it which comprise the sacred *Tetragrammaton* and the *Ineffable Name* of God. More details of Zerubbabel's story can be found in the Knights Templar *Illustrious Order of the Red Cross*. Thus, "the Royal Arch stands as the rainbow of promise of the resurrection; of that which was lost and that which shall be recovered" as Most Excellent William F. Kuhn presented in *The Necessity of the Royal Arch to the Master Mason*.

The Chapter of Rose Croix is the spiritual heart of the Scottish Rite and is focused on religion, philosophy, ethics, and history. Its 15th and 16th Degrees

are related to the rebuilding of the Temple at Jerusalem by Zerubbabel and portray the never-ending struggle against the adversaries of Truth and Light.

In conclusion, the story of Zerubbabel is important to the Craft and its Master Masons. Like Zerubbabel, we have a noble heritage of being a defender of liberty, a custodian of freedom, and a champion of Truth and Fidelity.

So Mote It Be!

