

## EXCELLENT MASTERS DEGREE

In this degree the candidate represents a descendant of the Jewish captives, carried into Babylon seventy years earlier, desiring to avail himself of a decree, proclaimed by Cyrus the King of Persia and Babylon, which would permit him to return to Jerusalem and assist in the rebuilding of the Holy Temple. The rebuilding was considered to be a unique privilege and considerable care was taken to exclude those who were not qualified under the decree. There were several levels of security to be passed before the aspirant could present himself before the Jewish Council, the Sanhedrin. In the degree the candidate passes through three veils, blue, purple and scarlet, representing the security gates to be passed and at each he receives the information necessary to gain admission.

On the First Veil the Scripture tells us that the Lord said unto Moses, "What is that in thine hand? And he said a rod. And He said, Cast it on the ground. And he cast it on the ground and it became a serpent; and Moses fled from before it. And the Lord said unto Moses. Put forth thine hand and take it by the tail. And he put forth his hand and caught it, and it became a rod in his hand".

In ancient symbolism, the serpent was an important emblem for many reasons. Pertinent to Royal Arch philosophy is its characteristic of shedding the skin, once every year and going forth, as it seems, a new and different creature. The lesson here is but a repetition of another taught in the symbolic Degrees, wherein the candidate is taught to divest himself of the vices and superfluities of life. This is the prime requisite before advancing towards the Holy Sanctuary.

At the 2nd Veil the scripture reading is: And the lord said furthermore unto him, Put now thine hand into thy bosom. And he put his hand into his bosom; and when he took it out, his hand was leprous as snow. And He said, put thine hand into thine bosom again. And he put his hand into his bosom again and plucked it out of his bosom and behold, it was turned again as his own flesh.

The sign of the leprous hand shows that the best understood conception of religion is that Godliness is righteousness. In even the best of men, there is an element of sinful uncleanness that must be healed. The leprous hand of Moses was cleansed by simply obeying the Commands of God. Spiritual cleanliness by obedience to God's laws, is the next step in progressing to the Sanctuary.

The scripture reading for the 3rd Veil includes that "thou shalt take of the water of the river, and pour it onto the dry ground; and the water which thou takest out of the river shall become blood on the dry land".

The alchemical philosophy of the middle ages is apparent here. Matter was arranged into classifications, with a different rank attached to each subject. Among solids, gold enjoyed first place, while with liquids, blood was superior in rank. Correspondingly, water is a very common substance and was considered inferior. Thus the turning of water into blood denotes the transmutation of someone from a lower to a higher plane.

So it should be with man's aspirations he should strive to rise above the commonplace into something that is better and holier.

Certain words are used during the ceremony and a brief explanation of their origin and significance is appropriate here.

Bezaleel and Aholiab were chosen by the Lord to assist Moses in erecting a Tabernacle in the wilderness; a sanctuary where the Lord could dwell among the Israelites in their wanderings.

Bezaleel's role was that of the designer or architect of the tabernacle. He was also renowned as a teacher of craftsmen. Many writers and historians refer to Bezaleel as the Holy One and it would appear that in casting about for a symbol of greatness for our Masonic lore the choice could just as easily have been Bezaleel as Hiram Abif.

Aholiab was, like Bezaleel, a very capable artificer in cloth, colours, linen, and as an engraver in stone, wood and metals. His particular employment at the building of the Tabernacle was in the manufacturing of the furnishings. He too was involved in the teaching and instruction of craftsmen who came seeking to play a part in the Holy Work.

English Royal Arch tradition tells us that prior to commencing the building of the Tabernacle a Meeting or Lodge was opened, at the foot of Mount Horeb in the Wilderness of Sinai, and presided over by Moses as Master and Bezaleel and Aholiab as Wardens. This is referred to as the 'Holy Lodge'.

Ammi and Ruhamah. In the first Chapter of Hosea, one of the minor prophets, we read that the second child of the union of Hosea and Gomer was a daughter and named Lo-ruhamah. After Gomer had weaned Lo-ruhamah, she conceived and bore a son. He was called Lo-ammi. The second Chapter discloses that in the first verse the word of the Lord is quoted. "Say ye unto your brethren Ammi and to your sisters Ruhamah."

This book of Hosea is interesting, as it states "the Lord will no more have mercy on the House of Israel, but will utterly take them away". "But I will have mercy upon the House of Judah and will save them". Hence the meaning of the words Ammi Ruhamah; My people having obtained mercy.