

## **PASSING THE VEILS - CEREMONY AND HISTORY.**

By Excellent Companion Gordon Mogg.

### **1. ORIGINS OF THE CEREMONY:**

The ancient and picturesque ceremony of Passing the Veils is contained in the Excellent Masters degree and is a required preliminary to the Royal Arch ceremony. It is a dramatic performance and when suitably presented can be most impressive, being open to a great variety of Masonic symbolism.

It may be said to be a highly elaborated system which seems to have been based partly on the old Irish ceremony, whilst drawing also on old English and American rituals.

There are four veils of blue, purple, crimson and white, denoting, respectively, Friendship, Unity (based on the union of blue and crimson producing purple), Fervency and 'Zeal (truly typical of R. A. Masonry) and Purity. In the Book of Chronicles 11, Ch. iii (14), it is said that "Solomon made the veil of blue; purple and crimson, and fine linen, and wrought cherubim thereon."

It would appear that a single veil is indicated in the Scripture and that it was placed before the Holy of Holies (Debir). This is in accord with the tabernacle made by Moses in the Sinai desert, where a single white veil was placed before the most holy place. The tabernacle was, however, hung with curtains in the manner of tapestry, which were of many interwoven colours, no one curtain being wholly of a single colour. These curtains or veils did not hang across-the tabernacle but covered its sides and roof.

The R. A. legend in the Excellent Masters Degree relating to the veils is based on the story by Josephus, the first century historian, in his "Antiquities of the Jews, Vol. 1, viii, Ch. 3", where he was referring to the interior of the first Temple, and not to the supposed tabernacle, said in the ritual to have been erected by Zerubbabel; Haggai and Joshua near its ruins. Josephus says that King Solomon "also had veils of blue; purple and scarlet (crimson), and the brightest and softest linen with the most curious flowers wrought upon them, which were to drawn before the doors." This story has no Biblical support and it is thought that Josephus unduly forced the symbolism of the veils by saying that they were composed of four things which declared the, four elements - Air, Water, Fire and Earth, blue. signifying Air, purple the Sea (Water), because the colour was dyed by the blood of a shellfish (the Murex), scarlet naturally representing Fire, whilst white signified Earth, as the fine linen was made of flax which grew out of the earth, and bore a white flower.

It is however, from Josephus that the Masonic ritual inventors took their ideas, rather than from the V.S.L. Whilst the tabernacle said to have been, erected, by Zerubbabel is not historically correct, it must be considered in the ritual sense as a symbol and this in no way diminishes its value to us. Masonic science claims to be a peculiar system of morality (or philosophy), veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols, but many Companions, unfortunately, do not consider

that it is veiled at all! No attempt is made to proceed beyond, say, the ethical aspect rather than delving under the surface; they never strive to lift the veil "which the eye of human reason cannot penetrate." Apparently, they do not realise that it is an allegory, or parable, and that to understand it properly, it, must be studied carefully and continually in order to arrive at its philosophical message.

## **2. SYMBOLISM:**

When referring to the symbolism of the veils as a whole, they constitute four divisions of the tabernacle erected by Zerubbabel and are obstacles to the Candidate in his advancement to the Sanhedrin, there to receive spiritual illumination and ultimately obtain the knowledge of the true name of God, Masonically speaking, the Divine Name is in itself a symbol of Truth, the object (or it should be) of every Companion's search and labours. Therefore, the passing through the veils is a symbol of overcoming trials and tribulations that must be surmounted in the long search for truth. Viewed as separate veils the symbolism alters and is independent for each veil, although the veils are really connected, just as the virtues which they symbolise are those which should apply to all Companions seeking the Truth.

In our ritual the symbolism of the Veils applies to the miraculous signs of Moses and also to the various colours of each of the veils themselves as detailed in the Excellent Master ritual:

**BLUE:** the colour of the Craft (symbolic degrees); is a symbol of Friendship and represents the first step in the search for Truth. The first sign; that of Moses casting the rod on the ground and it turning first into a serpent and then back to a rod in his hand, refers to the ancient symbolism of resurrection, as the serpent, by casting its skin every year, is supposed to renew itself. It is also the symbol of the lost Word and its recovery. The Candidate is being taught to divest himself of the veils and superfluities of life, which is a prime requisite before advancing towards the Holy Sanctuary.

**PURPLE:** portrays the union and close connection of the Craft and Royal .Arch Degree. The reference to Moses and the leprous hand with its subsequent restoration to health is a repetition of the loss and recovery of the Word, the Word being Divine Truth, and it also symbolises Spiritual cleanliness by obedience to Gods Law, which is the next step in progressing to the Holy Sanctuary.

**CRIMSON:** is the symbol of fervency and zeal, which indicates that the Candidate is so advanced in his progress as to expect success in his search. The changing of the water into blood, which is life, itself is symbolic of progress from darkness into light and denotes the transmutation of the Candidate from a lower to a higher plane.

**WHITE:** the veil of Purity, is to remind the Candidate that it is only by purity of life that he can find Divine Truth. "Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God."

The Passing of the Veils has symbolism which, viewed either separately or collectively, represents, at the last, the successful search for Divine Truth. In the Masonic tradition, anyone desiring to participate in the rebuilding of the Temple had first to pass through the three sections of the tabernacle, built by the exiles on their return from Babylon, these three sections being divided by the coloured veils. Having passed the veils and having been purified in the Middle Chamber the Candidate passes out from the provisional Sanctuary to the Holy Sanhedrin where he meets the three Chief rulers who send him to work in the ruins of the first Temple and carry on that great and holy work.

### **3. SOME RITUAL HISTORY:**

When the Rev. George Adam Browne compiled his revision of the Royal Arch ritual in 1834/35 (for English use) he said that, in the Passing of the Veils and during the perambulations, the Candidate was shown some very instructive objects and he referred to the serpent, towards which Moses had to stoop in order to pick it up, and, therefore, this action was interpreted as a sign of Humility. Ten years before Adam Browne's revision, the English radical, Carlile, in 1825, gave a fuller account of what happened and told of the spectacular display which took place: "At the first veil; the bandage is removed from the Candidate's eyes and he sees a bush on fire, a voice calls out: Moses, Moses", and here the Candidate has his shoes slipped off. At the second veil, the Candidate was not only shown the figure of a serpent but was told to pick up a rod, cast down by him, which had turned into a serpent. In the third veil the Candidate is made to behold the Ark of the Covenant, which contains the tables of stone, together with the pot of manna, the table of showbread, the burning incense and the candlesticks with seven branches (menorah). This last description is more or less referred to in the modern ritual of the Royal Master degree.

In the ancient ceremony there were "readings" passages of Holy Scripture for each veil, each with its appropriate word and sign. According to the Old American Royal Arch ritual, in the first veil the reading was Exodus iv, 1-10. Carlile gives it as Exodus iii, 1-6, as does Adam Browne - Exodus iii, 1-6, plus 13 & 14. The words in the Old American ritual were "Shem, Ham and Japhet". Both Carlile and Adam Browne give the word of an Installed Master in the Craft.

Adam Browne specifies no sign but Carlile states that it was the sign of a Past Master, whilst the Old American ritual gives the casting down of the rod which became a serpent, etc. In the second veil, the Old American ritual states that the reading was from the "Writings of Moses". Carlile and Browne quote Exodus iv, 1-5. The Old American ritual infers that the word was "Shem, Japhet and

Adoniram". Carlile gives it as "I am that I am" and Adam Browne gives "Moses, Aaron and Eleazor." The sign according to the American ritual was "thrusting the hand into the bosom and taking' it out as leprous as snow", whereas both Carlile and Browne say: "The stooping of Moses and picking up of the serpent." In the third veil, the Old American monitor says again "Writings of Moses", whilst both Carlile and Browne give Exodus iv, 6-9. The American gives the word as "Haggai, Jeshua and Zerubbabel, but Carlile as 'Moses, Aaron and Eleazor" and Browne gives "Holiness to the Lord." The sign in the American ritual was that of placing the hand into the bosom and bringing it out clean but both Carlile and Browne give the sign of this veil as a double one:-

- (i) The leprous hand of Moses which was restored.
- (ii) The pouring out of water both of which, of course, refer to the reading of Exodus iv, 6-9.

The ancient ritual still had another veil, the fourth one. This was at the entrance to the Chamber where sat the Holy Sanhedrin, which they conceived to have been beyond the tabernacle-proper. The Candidate had to pass through the three veils of the Sanctuary before he could penetrate the last one. The veils were drawn aside, the Candidate entered and, for the first time, was permitted to behold the Grand Council; High Priest, King and Scribe.

In England, the ceremony of Passing the Veils, with its Readings, Words and Signs, has been abandoned because (or so, it is, alleged) they made Freemasonry too cumbersome. What they have in fact done is to lose sight of the origin of Speculative Masonry, which was essentially a system of moral instruction, based on the Volume of the Sacred Law. However, as will be shown in para.7 of this paper, the "Bristol Working"; the colourful ceremony has been recently re-introduced.

#### **4. OTHER INTERPRETATIONS:**

The symbolism of Passing the Veils is that enlightenment which comes from Masonic progression, originally, the veils may have been an emblem of that mysterious veil which was rent in twain when the crucified Saviour passed through it. About 1800 A.D, there was an old Lancashire Craft ritual lecture in which the veil of the Temple signified Jesus Christ, Son of God, hanging on the Altar of the Cross, being the veil between ourselves and God.

The possibility cannot be ruled out that the veils had an alchemical interpretation. A Provincial Grand Chaplain of England said that the entire object of alchemic art "is the uncovering of the inner faculty of insight and wisdom and the removal of the veils intervening between the mind, and dividing it from its hidden Divine root." The veils were thought also to have been a symbol of the sufferings experienced by the Jews on their return from exile.

In the early ceremonies the veils were three in number but the Australian and American Chapters now work mainly a four veil ceremony. In England, there are at least twenty R.A. rituals in current use, eighteen of these including reference to a Symbolic Lecture on the Platonic Bodies. However, there is no uniformity existing on the geometrical and alchemical explanations of these "Platonic Bodies". When comparing the Passing of the Veils symbolism with that of the "Platonic Bodies" there is an interesting reference to a ritual used in the Hull R. A. ceremonies, the text of which goes back nearly 120 years, which states that Plato took the Tetrahedron as the symbol of the element of Fire, the Cube as that of Earth, the Octahedron as that of Water and the Icosahedron (a polyhedron having twenty faces), a symbol of the arts and sciences, as that of Air, whilst the Dodecahedron (a polyhedron having twelve faces, a number greatly favoured by the ancient Semites) was the symbol of the Universe itself. These symbols and meanings are switched about in the many different rituals. In our ritual we do not use the symbolism of the five regular polyhedra but their elemental symbolism is applied to the veils as derived originally from the writings of Josephus. As already mentioned, in England, the old ceremony of the veils fell into disuse and has now reappeared, only in very recent times, only in Bristol. The Irish view is that the veils ceremony is an integral part of their rite of exaltation and indeed, it is so worked, as it was also in the Old American Monitor.

An English R.A. Mason may therefore, quite properly, attend an Irish ceremony, since he is bound not to disclose its secrets by the obligation he has already taken at his own exaltation. Scotland and New South Wales, on the other hand, maintain that the veils ceremony, although an integral part of the Royal Arch ceremony, is a distinct and self-contained degree and is so denominated under the title of Excellent Master. As such, it is argued, it is not covered by the R.A. obligation and no person, therefore, may be present at the ceremony unless he has taken the Excellent Master degree. This currently presents difficulties to English Companions seeking to visit Scottish or New South Wales Chapters whilst the preliminary degree of Excellent Master is being worked.

## **5. PASSWORDS:**

With reference to the various passwords which have evolved in the Passing of the Veils ceremony, it has been said that, following the success attendant on the dramatization of the "Shibboleth" legend in the Craft degree, it may have had some influence upon the colourful ceremony of the Veils ceremony. As therein, the lifting of each veil is accomplished by giving a password based on the Biblical readings of Exodus, narrated to the Candidate for Excellent Master. If the password was introduced into various degrees to serve a utilitarian purposes, it was evidently found by the compilers of ritual to be an even more useful vehicle for the purposes of expansion of the ritual.

## **6. KABBALAH RELATIONSHIP:**

It may be of some interest to readers and hearers to touch on one relationship between the Royal Arch and the Kabbalistic degrees. Three veils are mentioned in the Book of the Greater Holy Assembly (Sepherha-IDRA-RABBA KADISHA) which are referred to as "Three Kabbalistic Veils of the negative existence." The first veil is called in Hebrew AIN (which means 'No'), i.e., negatively. The name is spelled with three letters and foreshadows the first three Sephiroth. The second veil is called AIN SOF, which means 'No bound' or 'boundless'. In Hebrew this name is written with six letters and it alludes to the first six. Sephiroth. The third veil is called AIN SOF AUR, which means 'Unbounded Light'.

This name consists of nine letters and refers to the nine Sephiroth. After this there remains MALKUTH ('Kingship'), the tenth Sephiroth. The Candidate had to pass through these veils after which he was said to have attained MALKUTH or KINGSHIP; that is to say it was the climax of Freemasonry as, according to General Charles Rainsford; who represented; English Freemasonry in 1784, when consulted by French Masons, he contended that the ritual of Freemasonry was derived from the Kabbalists.

## **7. THE BRISTOL CEREMONY:**

On Sunday, 13th August, 1758, two brethren were raised to the degree of Royal Arch Masons and, during-the following twelve months, four other meetings of the same kind took place, always on a Sunday evening, at the Crown Inn, Christmas Street and Bristol. In 1769, a new Chapter was chartered, Charity No.9, on the Register of the Grand Chapter and for many years the only Chapter in the Bristol Province. It is well known that the veils ceremony was worked but it is not true that it continued to be worked down through the years. It appears that the Beaufort Chapter of Bristol, in the late 19th. Century, worked only the verbal part of the veils ceremony but did not use the veils themselves, and nobody has been able to give any information about them. M.E. Comp. Sir Ernest Henry Cook, Provincial Grand Superintendent for Bristol 1920-1941, has compiled some personal recollections on, Passing the Veils, as practised in the Bristol Province and refers to the fact that, before 1890, there were no veils but the Principal Sojourner and Assistants were asked to retire and put the Candidate through the first portion of Passing the Veils. They then retired to the ante- room and the work was done, but without veils. The allusion to the three veils, suspended, of the colours of blue, purple and crimson, etc., induced some Companions to ask for further particulars of the ceremony. The matter was discussed at great length and no one could tell anything about them but it was confidently stated that, although referred to, the veils were not in use in the middle of the 19th Century in Bristol. Sir Ernest wrote to the English Grand Scribe "E", who advised that he knew nothing about the matter and could not tell of any Chapter in England where the ceremony was extant. Subsequently it was found that the veils were in use in some Chapters in Ireland and some in Scotland. References were found also in various books on Masonry. After

some difficulty, Sir Ernest had some three veils made with poles, cords and supports, these being suspended across the ante-room of the Chapter. The necessary ritual was then compounded, made up of what had been in use for many years (although without the actual veils) and what could be found in books and old R.A. rituals. The Grand Scribe "E" then stated that, whilst it was not then in use in England and as the Bristol proposal was merely to resuscitate a disused portion of the original ceremony, he considered that no objection could be taken to it. Thus Bristol proceeded and, towards the end of 1929 and after careful consideration, it was concluded that a fourth veil (of white) would add to the beauty of the ceremony. The Assistant Grand Librarian wrote to the Provincial Grand Scribe "E", Bristol, in 1932, saying that "the ceremony of the veils is now obsolete in England but still continued in most other countries, including notably the U.S.A the veils were doubtless part of the early ceremony of the Arch degree and the working of the same was, I believe, discontinued at the Union in 1817. In gathering information from countries outside England and from books on the subject, Sir Ernest Cook found many different usages and customs, such as, "Veils...four in number, of colours blue, purple, red and white, and all emblematical of the Equinoxes and Solstices, allegorically denominated the "Gates of Heaven." Summing up the results of his enquiry Sir Ernest stated that, whilst there is a strong tradition amounting almost to being universal, only Bristol was using the ceremony known as Passing the Veils in England, although it had been proved that such was very widely used in various forms. He stated further that the description in Exodus is so definite and far exceeds in importance any other reference to be obtained elsewhere.

#### **8. VARIOUS REFERENCES TO THE VEILS (VAILS<sup>2</sup> IN THE V. S. L.: EXODUS, Chapter 26.**

Verse 1. And the Lord spoke unto Moses saying "Moreover thou shalt make the tabernacle with ten curtains of fine twined linen, and blue and purple and scarlet; with cherubim of cunning (clever) work shalt thou make them." Verses 31-33:"And thou shalt make a vial of blue and purple and scarlet and fine twisted linen of cunning work; with cherubim shall it be made. And thou shalt hang it upon four pillars of shittim-wood (acacia) overlaid with gold, their hooks shall be of gold upon the four sockets of silver. And thou shalt hang up the vial under the clasps that thou mayest bring in thither within the vial the Ark of the Testimony and the veil shall be divided unto you between the Holy Place and the Most Holy (Sanctum Sanctorum)."

**Chapter 27.** Verse 16. "And for the gate of the court (of the tabernacle) shall be an hanging of twenty cubits of blue and purple and scarlet and fine twisted linen, wrought with needlework.

**Chapter 36.** Verse 8. "And every wise-hearted man among them that wrought the work of the tabernacle made the curtains of fine twisted linen and blue and purple and scarlet; with cherubim of cunning work made he them."

Verse 35. "And he made a veil of blue and purple and scarlet and fine twisted linen with cherubim made he it of cunning work."

Verse 37. "And he made a hanging for the tabernacle door of blue, purple and scarlet and fine twisted linen of needlework."

**Chapters 40/41.** "And he brought the Ark into the tabernacle and set up the veil of the covering and covered the Ark of the testimony as the Lord commanded Moses. "And he put the table in the tent of the congregation, upon the side of the tabernacle northward without (beyond) the veil."

**CHRONICLES 2, Chapter 3.** Verse 14. "And he (Solomon) made the veil of blue and purple and crimson and fine linen and wrought cherubim thereon."

## **9 CONCLUSION**

The object of any Masonic legend is to convey philosophical doctrines and is not in any way intended to establish historical facts. The ceremonies are external additions which do not affect the substance of Freemasonry as a science; that is a philosophy taught by a system of doctrines. The beginnings of Masonic philosophy go back a long way into antiquity and are not to be confounded with the ceremonies of Masonry, which go back but un-substantially little farther than the 1700's, (and, in some cases, not even so far, as many important modifications have been made to our rituals since that time, and are still being made.). As stated in the beginning of this paper, the Passing of the Veils ceremony is open to many philosophical interpretations.

(Acknowledgments to Ars Quatuor Coronatorum and to Mackey.)