

THE ARK OF THE COVENANT

Foreword

This paper makes reference to workings common in England, however, the discussion of the historical aspects of Royal Arch Masonry will be of interest.

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In the Harlequin Procession of 1725, in London, two of the Companions are said to have carried the Pageant, not a but the Pageant, implying that the object so designated was a unique one; and also that it was something very familiar, the most characteristic emblem of the Order of the Holy Royal Arch, which on that account did not need to be further detailed or described.

That the pageant was something connected with the Ceremonial of the Royal Arch is obvious, seeing that the record of another Masonic procession held at Youghal, Ireland, in 1743, calls it The Royal Arch, thus:

Fourthly, the Royal Arch carried by two Excellent Masons.

Fifthly, the Master, with all his proper Implements, his Rod gilt with Gold his Deputy on his left with Square and Compass.

So, evidently, the Pageant is what in the later document is called the Royal Arch. But what could the Royal Arch be? It might be one of several things. But, whatever we make out of it, the fact will remain that what those two Gentlemen Masons carried was a highly significant thing in Royal Arch Masonry.

Presumably it was an actual Arch, the Arch mentioned in the Exposures of that period, the Arch about which even the Craft Masons were cross-questioned in their Lodges.

The statement that the bearers were Excellent Masons must not be misconstrued. As we shall see, at that time, all the Royal Arch Companions were styled Excellent Masons. The word Excellent had not yet been adopted as a title indicative of rank, or as designating the Rulers of the Chapter. The Most Excellent, in 1743, is called the Master; Excellent, in 1725, meant that the Royal Arch Masons were men who had excelled in the Craft, had passed through the Degrees of Probation with distinction, and had in consequence obtained what the genuine Masons aimed at.

The use of a Rod, or Staff, as we call it nowadays, by the Master should be noted.

What, then, was the Royal Arch which was carried in the Procession of 1743 and exhibited to the bystanders? We can conceive two ways of reading the phase:

First, the word Arch suggests the model of an architectural arch and, as already stated, some of the Craft Masons saw in this Masonic symbol an allusion to Architecture, while others referred it to the Rainbow.

Secondly, it may be that the word was a variation of Ark. Indeed, we find many compound terms in which the ch of Arch is hardened and made to sound like k; as, for instance, the following: Arch-angel, Architect, Archgeology, Arche-type, Arch-ive, Arch-on, etc. Moreover, it appears that in Norman French, once spoken and written in England, arche was used in the sense of a Chest or Box. Skeat's Etymological Dictionary informs us that there had been some confusion on account of the two acceptations of the term: (1) Arche, a Chest or Box; (2) Arche, an Arch.

If the word was intended to express the idea of an Ark, therefore, we should have to assume that the reference was to the Ark of the Covenant.

Companion Stokes, M.D., in his brochure on Royal Arch Masonry, makes a brief statement in which he allows the possibility of Arch having been meant for the Ark, for he says: This may refer to the Ark of the Covenant, which was frequently included in Lodge regalia.

As a matter of fact in the eighteenth century, according to the Old American Ritual, the Ark of the Covenant was the most important ornament of the Chapter, the whole Ceremony of Exaltation being based and centring on the finding of it. Inside the Ark all the secrets had been deposited, and when it was brought into the Chapter it had to be examined and identified by the High Priest, who showed it to all the Companions present.

The Ark, when found, had an inscription that ran around its four sides and read as follows: Deposited in the year 3000. By Solomon, King of Israel, Hiram, King of Tyre, and Hiram Abiff, for the good of Masonry in general but the Jewish nation in particular.

Why was it that the early Craft Masons included models of the Ark of the Covenant among the Regalia of their Lodges?

Simply because the originators of Craft Masonry felt that they must imitate the Ancient Lodges praised in the Constitutions of 1723. They left it out of the Ceremonies, the Ark being never mentioned among them, but they allowed the use of the symbol to remain among their regalia as a witness to the character of the earlier Freemasonry.

Before passing on we must note that at the close of the eighteenth century even the Gentile Freemasons acknowledged that Freemasonry had preserved its secrets across the centuries for the good of the Jewish nation in particular. In speaking thus they did not deny the larger mission of our Order, but obviously they viewed Freemasonry as the patrimony of the Jews.

In reality it makes very little difference whether we read arch or ark in the Youghal record. For if what the Royal Arch Masons carried was a model of an Arch, there is no mistaking its allusion to the Arch constructed by King Solomon, under which, in later times, the Ark of the Covenant, with all its secrets, was hid away and subsequently discovered.

The term Pageant denotes some elaborate ornament carried about or paraded and displayed by the Masons on some ceremonial occasion, and therefore an

alternative to the two possible interpretations here given has been suggested: it consists in taking the phrase, the Royal Arch, as meaning the Banner or Standard of the Royal Arch. But, if we allow this, we should have to suppose that on the Banner was depicted some device, the distinctive symbol of the Royal Arch, which thus gave its name to it. And what else could the supposed device be. Therefore we come back to the same question: What was the Pageant carried in the Procession.

If anything is clear and unquestionable it is that the Ark of the Covenant was the most essential ornament in the Chapter, and that everything ultimately led to it. In the Old American Ritual and in England also, during the eighteenth century, down to the time of Carlile's Exposure, 1825, the Ark of the Covenant was for all Royal Arch Masons the outstanding emblem of our Order. At present this is no longer the case. But why Simply because in England we have dropped it almost completely, Our abridgement of the old Royal Arch Ritual still contains three very pointed allusions to it; but there being no facsimile of the object itself on view, we cannot visualize it.

But can there be any reason for doubting that the Royal Arch Masons of two centuries ago attached to the Ark of the Covenant just as much importance as they did at the close of the eighteenth century? Their parading it as their distinctive symbol involves as much. Or if it is not conceded that what they carried was the Ark, but a model of the Arch, we must still admit that it was something that reminded the Companions of the Ark beneath, for that Arch was something that had been built over the Vaulted Chamber.

The Ark was not only the most significant symbol in Freemasonry, but also the most ancient, the most venerable, the most precious heirloom of the Jewish people; and we should not forget that the Royal Arch Masons were presumed to be members of the tribe of Judah, with the Priests of Israel as their predecessors, the men who offered sacrifices for the atonement of the nation, and who regarded everything connected with the Royal Arch as sacred.

And this being so, how can we account for its disappearance? The answer is simple enough: it was owing to the necessity to adapt and to simplify to a minimum the Ceremonies in order to evolve a popular system that should take the place of the Old Freemasonry.

One more observation: in ancient Israel the Ark was usually carried about by two Priests on their shoulders. (See 2 Sam. iv. 4, xv. 29; I Chron. xv. ii.) And in the Processions of 1725 and 1743, also, two Excellent Masons appear to have been detailed to do this.

It is a thousand pities that a symbol once so highly esteemed should have been allowed to go into disuse. By its elimination our Supreme Degree has been weakened and impoverished. Until a comparatively recent date, the Supreme Chapter had the Ark of the Covenant in the centre of the room. That Ark has disappeared; it perished in the fire, and no one now seems to care that it is no longer in evidence. For how could any Royal Arch Mason miss it when all knowledge of the symbol has been lost, and when almost everything about it has been struck out from the Ritual?

As the Ark was the most cherished and precious asset of the people of Israel, considering the use made of it in former days, we cannot resist the conclusion that Freemasonry in its origin was connected with Judaism.

As stated before, the construction of the Arch was due to the initiative of the Royal Solomon; but our tradition is that when the Temple was to be rebuilt, some five hundred years after, the man in whom the Monarchy was restored, Zerubbabel, had that dome resealed with a mystic headstone, which invested the Chamber with a peculiar character. With him there were associated two other great men and the whole Sanhedrin; whence the title of Harodim, the Rulers, given to those worthies. This title has always been claimed by the genuine Freemasons. Dr. Anderson was very curious about the derivation of Harodim, and in his Constitutions of 1723 he pointed out that it was a Hebrew plural, and that it signified Rulers or Provosts. His persistent curiosity is all the more remarkable, seeing that in Craft Masonry the term Harodim does not occur at all. He was much concerned in it, because he had in mind the old Lodges, where it was a recognized title, and where constant use was made of it.

It has always been a tradition of ours that after the precious heirloom of the Hebrew nation had disappeared from the Temple and was considered irrecoverably lost, our predecessors found it in a subterranean Chamber; and the Royal Arch has always commemorated this auspicious event.

That our story is not a fairy tale, an invention of recent times, but an extremely ancient and venerable tradition, may be proved by the fact that it is given almost exactly as we have it by an ecclesiastical writer of the fourth century, Philostorgius. He had heard it from other people, and did not realize that it was something which had been transmitted from much earlier times by a secret Brotherhood associated with the Temple of Jerusalem. The story was kept alive quite independently of that writer; indeed, the generality of Christian scholars after Philostorgius ignored it; it had not the slightest interest for them; it was the Kabbalistic Jews who transmitted it to posterity; and therefore we are indebted to a Spanish Jew, Manasseh ben Israel, who gave us the mediaeval version of it in *El Conciliador*, published at Frankfort in 1632.

Manasseh ben Israel has already been mentioned as a Kabbalistic instructor who some years after came to England disguised as a merchant, and made proposals to the Protector for the free admission of Jews and the free exercise of their religion.

We are told that the Chapter of Cincinnati, Ohio, U.S.A., has recently presented a golden Triangle to the Avon Chapter. This Triangle comes to remind us of an ancient practice. The Royal Arch Chapters of America have an equilateral Triangle which rests on the Ark of the Covenant, and on the three sides of it there are the three particles J. B. O in Masonic script. The tracing which has been sent to us of such a Triangle is not in the original Masonic alphabet of the States of America; rather it seems to be in the Continental type, but this is a mere detail.

What we should take notice of is that, according to all the old Royal Arch Rituals, both in America and in England, the chief incident in the Ritual was the

discovery of the Ark of the Covenant, and the cover of the Ark was a plate of gold on which was depicted the geometrical figure which has been described. In the oldest American Ritual, however, there were three trying squares, which in reality were three large Taus or plummets; and these being superimposed and resting one on top of the other, formed a Triangle. We have already observed that the trying squares were emblems of power corresponding to the three Principals and on each of them there was, written one particle of the Sacred Word, J. B. O.

In the Province of Bristol, where a much older Ritual is practised than in the rest of England, at the second descent the Sojourners bring to light a golden Triangle with the Sacred Word upon it. This telling incident suggested the words still spoken by the M. E. Z. amongst us:

Prepare to receive the light of His Holy Word.

These words, however, have become superfluous because with us the Candidate does not hear the Word. One only of the Sojourners claims to have seen it, but the object on which it is engraved is not produced. This is only an instance of how the Degree has been truncated.