

# **THE DEGREE OF EXCELLENT MASTER**

## Foreword

This paper appears to have been written with a NSW ritual in mind. It is, however, applicable to the USGC ritual in all but a couple of points.

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This degree forms, as it were, the bridge between the Craft and Royal Arch Freemasonry; the link between the physical and spiritual realms. Craft Freemasonry concentrates its attention on the perfection of character, of which King Solomon's Temple is the symbol, while in Royal Arch Freemasonry we are led into a vastly higher conception of our duties to each other, which becomes much easier when we have developed the finer attributes of character to a satisfactory level. Thus, it is in the building of the Second Temple that the expected revelation may materialise, and it is in this degree that we are given a direct clue as to the nature of our work in the Royal Arch.

Moreover, this Degree illustrates a period of change, not only in the history of the period on which the ritual is based, but from a Masonic point of view, in presenting a new line of thought and conception of the future. In so doing it might serve to remind us that often in life we are compelled to chose a definite course, the result of which may abide with us during the rest of our lives. A decision must be made affecting not only our own future, but perhaps that of many others. It poses the question as to how many of us are capable of choosing wisely and carefully, being unprejudiced by the self-interest and other influences, and at the same time having a proper regard for the result of our decisions on the lives of others. The Degree suggests that we should neglect no opportunity of fitting ourselves to make such decisions, so that we may be capable of exercising intelligent judgement, with due regard to the factors involved.

It must be understood that it is an important Degree and a necessary link in the chain of six Degrees ranging from the Entered Apprentice to the Royal Arch as practised in NSW Freemasonry. These are all recognised by our Grand Lodge and our Grand Chapter as being Pure Ancient Masonry, no doubt because in all of them instruction is by precept and example based upon the usages and customs of our ancient Brethren, the Operative Masons. At first Speculative Masonry had as its basis the Craft Masonry, but about the year 1725 an addition was made and symbolism drawn from the building and equipment of King Solomon's Temple became an important part of the instruction.

Now, to come to our very remarkable Degree of Excellent Master It is unique in being the only one we have in which the scene is a Grand Lodge, and a Grand Lodge at, of all places, Babylon in about 540BC (refer to our working instructions)

It is also unique in the astonishingly wide field it covers. It is short but in it we have many characters and events. Namely King Solomon and the Temple; Nebuchadnezzar who destroyed it; Cyrus the King of Persia; Moses and the

Burning Bush at Mt. Horbeb, together with the miraculous signs given to him there; the Tabernacle in the wilderness; Bezaleel and Aholiab who constructed the Tabernacle and its Veils; Zerubbabel, the Prince of the Royal Line of Judah; Haggai the Prophet; Jeshua the High Priest; and the return of the Jews to their homeland from captivity in Babylon with Zerubbabel, Haggai and Jeshua.

It would seem unlikely that all these persons and incidents could be in any way related to Freemasonry, but it can be shown not only that most of them are - but that they all fall into place in the picture presented by the Degree.

### **THE TABERNACLE.**

The Tabernacle scene forms an important part of the ceremony. There is no historical evidence of the erection of a tabernacle at the Second Temple and, like many other stories in Freemasonry, it is a myth introduced for symbolic purposes. It is possible that some sort of shelter was erected near the Temple ruins to form a meeting place for worship and consultation. Also that the Altar of Sacrifice, inseparable from all Jewish enterprises, would be erected in open court, as was usual in any case. In the real Tabernacle the curtains 'veils' were around the walls and did not divide it into compartments as are used in this Degree. The Holy of Holies was in the West, not in the East, as depicted in a Masonic Temple.

The curtains or veils have been so placed in our Tabernacle in the Chapter Room in order that the symbolism obviously contained within them may be considered in two aspects. Firstly in reference to the symbolism of the veils as a whole, and secondly to each veil separately.

As a whole the four veils, constituting four divisions of the Tabernacle, present obstacles to the Candidate's advance to the Most Holy Place, wherein the Sanhedrin sits. He is seeking advancement to that Sacred Spot that he may receive there his spiritual illumination and be invested with a knowledge of the True Name or Word, in other words 'Divine Truth'.

## **PASSING THE VEILS.**

So we have set the stage and introduced the principal characters of the Degree of Excellent Master. We may now examine its working and the mysteries of its symbolism.

Firstly, the five pointed star is applied to the Candidate's left breast, which is the figurative seat of the affections which hold him true and faithful.

Secondly, at the Blue Veil and on admission, the Scripture Reading recalls the appearance of a 'sight' to Moses in a Burning Bush so that in each of our hearts there may be enkindled a flame of devotion. This is the essential object of the Degree.

In the episode of the Burning Bush and the three signs associated with it, as well as in the Passing of the Veils, we have a line of thought which is entirely new in Freemasonry. Although it is based on the first declaration of Faith made by the Candidate at his Initiation, it is of particular importance, not only to Excellent Masters, but also to Royal Arch Masons, because it prepares us for the Supreme Degree.

It is not too much to hope that 'the great sight' which Moses turned aside to see was one of the major incidents recorded in the V.S.L.. It was of vital importance to Moses and Israel, then to all mankind, and finally to Freemasons.

It was at the Burning Bush that 'HE' revealed to Moses, not only HIS essential Nature in the words 'I am that I am', but that 'HE' had a Name. HE had been the Deity of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, their Lord Almighty, but His Name had not been known to them.

The symbolism as used in the ritual refers to the colours of the veils and to the miraculous signs of Moses which are described in Exodus as having been shown to him to prove his mission as the messenger of Jehovah. The Mosaic sign of the serpent (first veil) was the symbol amongst the ancients of the resurrection to life, because the serpent, by casting his skin, was supposed to continually renew his youth. It is a symbol here of the loss and recovery of the Word.

There were good reasons why those particular miracles should have been chosen and for their special effect. The evil and dangerous things from which Moses fled were the Serpent and the Rod. These were symbols of the power and the wisdom not only of Osiris, the chief of the Egyptians, but also of the Pharaoh, who was his accepted representative on earth. The Israelites also knew that the Pharaoh wore a serpent on his headdress and carried a rod or staff. For Moses to turn his common rod into a serpent or staff and vice-versa was practically a scornful sign that he was the representative of a Power far surpassing that of either the false deity or the Pharaoh.

At the Blue Veil we find the sign of the Rod and the Serpent, here symbols of malignant earthly power and wisdom, and also the word B.....l which means 'I will protect'.

At the Purple Veil, with the sign of perhaps the vilest evil which ruin the life of a human being, there is the word A.....b meaning 'shelter and protection as of a father'.

Leprosy was an incurable, and loathsome disease, at that time endemic in Egypt, and for those who contacted it meant a living death, separated from all they held dear.

At the third or Scarlet Veil the Mosaic symbol of changing water to blood (or wine as it used to be), bears the same symbolic reference to a change for the better, from a lower to a higher state, from the elemental water in which there is no life, to blood which is life itself in other words from darkness to light. The progress is still onwards towards that Word; towards the recovery of that which was lost.

In doing so the Candidate will figuratively be fortified by the meaning of the G...d. W..d of the Degree. Actually these two words, found in the Book of Hosea, 'A..i' meaning 'my people' and 'R...a', meaning 'have found mercy'. They express the Feeling of the Excellent Masters from Babylon who have arrived at the White Veil.

In the Degree of Excellent Master, alone among all six degrees of the Craft and R.A., no working tools are presented because there is no work. It is a degree of contemplation meant to enkindle in the Candidate's heart the flame of devotion with which he approached the White Veil.

Let me remind you of the injunction in the final charge, which unfortunately is so seldom heeded, '...to acquire such a degree of knowledge and information as will enable you to discharge with propriety the various duties incumbent upon you, and so preserve unsullied, the title we confer of Excellent Master.

*In the USGC ritual we do not have a Final Charge, rather, we have an Historical Lecture which does not contain the above words. PLH*

Thus the Excellent Masters Degree depicts that turning point in history where began the history of religion, culture and intellectual progress which represents modern civilisation. Zeal, devotion to duty, loyalty, self sacrifice and patience are symbolised in the allegory of the Degree. Read the story carefully, in the Ritual, together with the various conceptions, assisted by a modern commentary, translate it into realistic terms and you may enjoy a greater and finer conception of the Degree than you have hitherto done.