

THE ROYAL ARCH THE SUMMIT AND PERFECTION OF FREEMASONRY

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There is much yet to learn about the early history of Royal Arch Masonry, much that remains conjecture (although probably very reasonable conjecture), for very little is known of the Degree before we suddenly find it practised in Lodges in the 1740's, as a new and separate Rite. Many references may be held to indicate that coming events in Royal Arch Masonry were "casting their shadows before" in the 1720's and 30s. The instances taken separately may seem unimportant; but collectively they suggest that somewhere in Masonry at that time there was an acquaintance with what we now recognise as the Royal Arch story. And since we know that these things do not happen suddenly, but develop slowly from some original and probably elementary conception; it is not unreasonable to conclude that the essential elements of the Royal Arch may have been known to certain Freemasons much earlier than is generally acknowledged by our historians.

The absence of written or printed evidence does not, in my opinion, discount the theory. The fact that the Royal Arch Degree was worked by Craft Lodges, even after the formation of Chapters, also confuses the issue. At any rate, it seems quite possible that the Hiramic legend and the allegory of the Royal Arch grew up together some time after the middle of the 17th century, but because they may have been communicated only to Masters of the few Lodges then formed, their existence was not clearly revealed until much later. If Masters only learned the secret, that would itself account for the lack of evidence of its beginnings. It should be explained that, over the period bridging the 18th and 19th centuries, none but Installed Masters were acceptable as candidates for the Royal Arch. At first this rule was evidently rigidly observed, but with the great expansion in the number of Lodges and Brethren early in the 18th century, there was such a demand by Master Masons for the Degree that means were designed to qualify them for exaltation by passing them through a constructive ceremony known as the Past-master's Degree, by which they became "Virtual Past-masters."

Whatever may be the arguments for or against any particular theory, the design and aim of Speculative Freemasonry must have been Formulated about this period, and both legends were undoubtedly essential to symbolically depict this. It may have been, and probably was, then structurally imperfect, but at least the design must have been completed. It certainly could not have been built up piecemeal or progressively. Neither the Hiramic nor the vault legends have any factual basis. They are not even very sensible stories, and certainly do not well bear analysis. This very fact must, I think, lead to the conclusion that the licence taken with the facts of history regarding the Temples, by introducing these little fantasies, was in order to adapt the circumstances to a special plan or design; for what other reason could they have been devised? It is an interesting speculation and I doubt if we will ever know the real facts of our origin and early history.

It was in the 1740s that we first find definite evidence of the Royal Arch being worked in a distinct Degree, and from that time it seemed to develop and expand so rapidly that Grand Chapters were formed under both the Grand Lodges ("Antients" and "Moderns") which governed English Freemasonry from about 1739-1813. The early form of Royal Arch ceremony was no doubt a very primitive one, but that it contained the essential elements is proved by the earliest MS ritual that has been found, dating about 1760, which is regarded by J. Heron Lepper, a noted authority, as proving the genuine antiquity of the Rite. It is obvious that in the composition of our present ritual there has been considerable natural evolution, and finally, quite serious intentional revision. The Christian content, which was considerable in the early stages, was not finally removed until early in 19th century. The great revision of 1835 was the final one of consequence, and resulted in the one worked today. I refer, of course, to the English ritual. The N.Z. Constitution substantially adopted the Scottish working, but this differs only in form of presentation.

Reviewers Note: The U.S.G.C. of N.S.W & A.C.T initially used the rituals of both the English and Scottish constitutions. In 2012 a preferred ritual combining aspects of both the English and Scottish rituals was published by the USGC.

The building analogy provided by the two Temples was skilfully developed to provide connection and continuity of symbolism, and thus weld Speculative Freemasonry, including the Royal Arch, into a wonderful harmonious conception, depicting on the one hand the progress of human life from birth until its final emergence into a higher plane, and on the other, the Grand Objective of the Craft in its search for Divine Truth or God. As Master Masons we are expected to develop our character and moral worth to fit us for our search, and as Royal Arch Masons we are enjoined to extend the boundaries of our knowledge to enable us to discern and discover the Truth, and enshrine it in a fit sanctuary within us. Remember, it is not the actual building these Temples which constitutes the most important point in Freemasonry. They are merely the material on which is based the symbolism for the lesson and instructions which are designed to prepare and fit us for the great object of our Craft, the revelation of the Royal Arch.

It is my purpose, therefore, to try to explain something of the underlying purpose or motif of Ancient Freemasonry, of which the Royal Arch is the climax. The Degree of Excellent Master, which is of course part and parcel of the Royal Arch, forms as it were the bridge between Craft and Capitular Freemasonry, the link between the physical and spiritual realms. Here we are led into a vastly higher conception of our duties to each other, and our relationship to our Creator.

When Zerubbabel, authorised by the decree of Cyrus, returned from the Captivity to Jerusalem to rebuild the former Holy Place, it was the enthusiasm and generosity of the people who accompanied him which made the ultimate accomplishment of their Grand Design possible. They were eager to work, and through their work to see the former splendour of God's House restored. We

can realise now that during their captivity they were dominated and obsessed by the thought that their God had no seemly abode wherein to dwell, Many of you have often heard the poignant lament, "By the rivers of Babylon there we sat down, yea, we wept when we remembered Zion.". For it must be remembered that in those far-off days, they visualised their God as localised within the Shrine erected to His glory and for His worship. To the Jews it was the place where they fervently believed that Jehovah made His dwelling place. Accordingly, they embellished it richly and lavishly, so as to make it a fit place for Him. In our symbolic language the Temple represents man, his inner and spiritual being. There is no doubt that this analogy was adopted from the Bible itself, for we find there many such references which must have inspired the framing of our whole system and objective.

For the grand ideal in Freemasonry, to which all else is subsidiary and contributory, is the conception of man as a Holy Temple, a dwelling place for His Spirit. Our efforts to develop good character and moral refinements are mainly for the purpose of providing a fit place for the Divine within us. The Book says, "Know ye not that ye are the Temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?". This, together with the words of the prayer you hear in the Excellent Degree, "Since sin has destroyed within us the first Temple of purity and innocence, do Thou assist us in building a second Temple by reformation," reveals clearly enough our path and destination.

The call of Zerubbabel was like the blast of a trumpet, and awakened responsive echoes in every fervent Jewish breast. They came in their thousands to join in the enterprise. All who could gave their labour gladly and ungrudgingly, and those who were precluded from rendering physical service sustained the work with gifts, "silver and gold, beasts of burden, and valuables as well.". The names of the foremost leaders are familiar to us all; but remember that it was the army of unnamed brethren whose faithful labour was responsible for the restoration of God's House.

In each Exaltation ceremony we are reminded that we are the prototypes of those humble brethren, and that upon the faithful fulfilment of our allotted tasks and upon that alone, rests the prospect of erecting that spiritual dwelling to which our Ritual directs us. In the work of a Chapter, the restoration of the Temple typifies for us the essential need for the faithful service of every Companion.

As individuals we must gird the trowel of service, and by our time, our talents and our means, contribute something to the common good.

As citizens we must gird the sword with which our ancient brethren laboured. For there are saboteurs and discouragers in every noble undertaking. While some endeavour to build, there are others who try to destroy and tear down. Let us not forget that next to obedience to lawful authority, a manly and determined resistance to lawless violence is one of the most important steps towards social order.

The Excellent Master's Degree illustrates a period of change also, not only in the history of the period on which the Ritual is based, but from a Masonic point of

view, as presenting a new line of thought and conception of the future. For the foundation of all that represents modern civilisation, and all that we are today, is the direct result of the decree of Cyrus. If the Jews, with their traditions and strong religious principles, strengthened and regenerated by the new lease of life granted them under this dispensation, had not been the inhabitants of Palestine, and had not the Romans been in occupation, the event which introduced Christianity to the world may never have happened, and certainly would not have penetrated the western world as it did. It required this special set of circumstances and conditions to make this possible. In no other place but Palestine at that time could these have been so provided. This is a solemn thought. And so, it is through the portals of this degree that we enter on the path of our spiritual regeneration.

A writer says, "The symbolism of the Royal Arch is of the most exalted and sublime type, and its beautiful ritual is expressive of the highest ideals associated with the intimate search for, and ultimate discovery of, Divine Light and Truth,". This Truth, which Masonry makes the great object of its investigations, is not that of science or history, but the more important truth which is synonymous with the knowledge of the nature of God. For whether we are actually conscious of it or, not, this is the object of all our researches. Most intelligent beings experience, in varying degrees, something of a wondering and compelling urge to know, to feel assured. Freemasonry is designed to help to establish a comforting conviction.

And so, in our Craft, the two Temples of Solomon and Zerubbabel serve to symbolise the loss, search and discovery in continuous form.

What was lost in the Third Degree and found in the ceremony of the Royal Arch is depicted by the word found on the Altar. But it is a symbol only; we are not searching for any particular word, or, in fact, a word at all. The expression, "the word" had significance for the Jews, and other ancient races which is a little difficult for us to comprehend. In their minds it signified all truth, particularly Divine Truth, which, as I have already explained, is our symbolic expression for God. To us the most familiar and striking passage referring to this is that of St. John: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.". Before Freemasonry was de-Christianised, this was the passage actually used, where we now employ the one: "In the beginning God created," etc. What happens in the ceremony merely symbolises the discovery of "the Word," or God, within oneself.

A charge given in another Degree says, "Frail man at one time lost his knowledge of, and perfect accord with, Deity." The Royal Arch endeavours to restore to us the awareness of God which we lost. But, as I have said, just being told or reading about it is not sufficient. Throughout all its Degrees Freemasonry merely shows the way, the means and the end. Far too many, however, are satisfied with the superficial moral titillations provided by our beautiful and expressive ritual, and fail to realise that the true discovery is something yet to be accomplished.

Our whole Masonic system is designed to symbolically represent the experience or evolution which must take place within each individual before he can really acquire that awareness of God to which our labours are principally directed to establish an unshakeable belief and faith, and a positive conviction as to what and where God is, constitutes one of the most important issues of life. That conceptions will and do vary does not matter. The point is that without it there is nothing to provide true stability and consistency, and a standard by which all else can be evaluated. To this end therefore there is a course of education and discipline which we must all undergo in the perfecting of character and development of spiritual consciousness, which will ultimately enable us, in varying degrees, to acquire it.

This may seem a formidable task, and for many of us it might well be. But, since we enjoy the Godlike ability to think and reason, and thus control and regulate our actions, we have it in our power to accomplish all this, if we will; and its successful development and attainment will gradually bring to us that tranquillity and serenity of mind, restfulness of spirit, and mental contentment, which is evidence of His presence and the reward of our labours.

The wise old teachers of the past have said with one accord, "God, Lord of the Universe, heap worldly goods and gifts at the feet of foolish men; but on my head pour only the sweet waters of serenity, give me the gift of the untroubled mind."

Let me say that I have depicted what to me is the summit of Freemasons, the perfection as it were. Few ever attain it. But to know what there is to strive for can I think be helpful and encouraging, ever remembering that any genuine effort, however humble, to make of yourself what can and should be made, will not go unrewarded.