

THE MEANING AND PRESENTATION OF THE ROYAL ARCH DEGREES

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INTRODUCTION

Our Degrees are difficult to understand fully and demand thought and study. A Chapter cannot present the Degrees intelligently to its candidates unless those involved understand exactly what they are endeavouring to portray.

These notes therefore offer a brief explanation of each Degree with some general suggestions as to their presentation.

THE MARK DEGREE

This Degree largely follows the style of the Craft Degrees and it is an accident of history that has placed it in the same group as the Royal Arch Degrees. It is operative in character, teaches moral not spiritual lessons, and it is a natural sequence to the Fellow Craft. In portraying the organisation of workmen involved in quarrying and preparing the stones for Solomon's Temple, it concerns itself with one of the "lodges" or groups, ruled over by a Mark Master and with the normal complement of Overseers and Workmen.

The Candidate first enters the Chapter Room, now a Mark Master's Lodge, and there proves himself to the Principal Officers as qualified for advancement beyond the Degree of Master Mason. He is told how the Fellow Craft must first become a Mark Man - i.e. he must receive and register a Mark and learn how to present it at the Mark Man's aperture to draw wages for his work. Thereafter he is obligated in the usual way, to protect the secrets of the Degree.

Now qualified for advancement beyond the status of a Mark Man, he leaves the Mark Lodge to visit the Quarries where he is to develop his skill and earn admission to the group of more competent workmen who have become Mark Masters or overseers. His progress is not straightforward. A plan (which he has previously glimpsed) is lost! But from memory, he has worked by it and has achieved a masterpiece - the Keystone!

After his adventures in the Quarries, including his unfortunate attempt to obtain the wages of a Mark Master though qualified only as a Mark Man, he is conducted again to the Mark Master who gives him another chance to qualify.

Suddenly news is received that the building cannot proceed, as a necessary Keystone, previously ordered from the Quarries, cannot be found. To the Overseers it had been simply a badly shaped block of stone and therefore useless. What else to do but have it thrown away as useless for the building?

The Mark Master is irate! He had ordered a Keystone and apparently it was well prepared but, through the loss of a plan, it was thrown away! After due search however it is found and the workman who prepared it is found worthy, through his skill, of being admitted as a Mark Master and so a qualified Overseer, a useful advancement indeed!

The lessons of the Degree are moral and as yet no spiritual aspects have appeared. As in the Craft Degrees, they are lessons of man living with man, of faithful workmanship, of our complete responsibility for every act we may perform and of the need to do to the best of our ability, whatever work may come our way. We learn too that we should not judge hastily, as the actions of our fellow men may have value that is not apparent to us. We must use our talents to their fullest extent and should we be misunderstood, we must not be discouraged as ultimately we will be justly and fairly judged.

In presenting the Degree we must see clearly the difference between the Mark Lodge and the Quarries. In the Lodge the Candidate is admitted as a Mark Man, takes an Obligation, and is finally re-admitted to receive his reward - admission as a Mark Master. In the Quarries the "rejection" occurs and the Candidate attempts to obtain the higher wages to which he is not entitled. The "search" is of course on the outskirts of the Quarries.

In working the Degree it is important to keep these various localities clearly in mind.

THE EXCELLENT DEGREE

The time has now come to leave the moral lessons of the Craft and Mark Degrees and begin the transition to the spiritual teachings of the Royal Arch. We leave Solomon's Temple for the Temple of Zerubbabel.

Historically the Degree is sited at Babylon where the exiled Jews have at last received permission from the enlightened Cyrus of Persia to return to Jerusalem and there build another Temple as to the centre of their faith. Only orthodox Jews were allowed to return and it was necessary to create tests by which the travellers could prove themselves when they arrived at Jerusalem. The secret answers to these tests were given to them at Babylon and this is the basis of the Excellent Degree.

In this latter-day parallel to the first exodus, what tests could be more appropriate than those based on the early episodes in the life of Moses himself? Some forty years before, he had passed those tests when commanded by God to lead his people out of the bondage of Egypt. By each of these; the Rod, the L..... H... and the Spilled Water, Moses had been charged with his great task. Just so were the Jews prepared for their return and to each of these tests, great lessons are attributed in our Excellent Degree.

Once again it opens in a Lodge, a Lodge of Excellent Masters, where the Candidate is Obligated. After retirement he enters a building in Babylon, specially prepared with veils based on those used in the ancient Tabernacle as coverings for the walls. For the tests the Jews are depicted as placing the veils across the building as successive barriers, through which their brethren must pass to qualify for the return to Jerusalem. The white veil, the final barrier, indicated the entrance to the Sanhedrin, traditionally already at Jerusalem, and so the Candidate in this Degree never penetrates the veil. That can only come when he is at Jerusalem and seeks admission to the Council and a place in the work. Having passed the veil he returns to the Lodge Room for the concluding ceremonial of the Degree. Thereafter and until he takes the Royal Arch Degree, he is on the long journey from the Babylon of the Excellent Degree to the Jerusalem of the Royal Arch. The journey is emblematic of the transition from the earthly symbolism of Babylon (for we have not yet passed beyond moral lessons) to the spiritual

concepts of the Heavenly Jerusalem. For there we will indeed come face to face with the spiritual truths that are the ultimate rewards of all Freemasonry.

THE ROYAL ARCH DEGREE

Technically the Royal Arch is much the most difficult of the three Degrees as its lessons are deep and fundamental, and in physical preparation it must be intelligently sited in so many differing areas.

The Degree opens in a Chapter Room, where the Candidate must be Obligated to preserve the secrets of the Degree. He retires to enter the building in Jerusalem where the Sanhedrin is sitting, with the entrance protected by the veils, each with its captain or guard. He passes the veils by means of the tests received at Babylon and now for the first time enters the white veils. Here he finds the Sanhedrin itself, the Chiefs in their rich robes and head pieces, with the Council fully in session. He is examined, accepted and sent off to begin work clearing away the ruins of the old Temple.

The discovery that is made is miraculous though its full import is beyond the understanding of the workmen. They decide to return to the Sanhedrin to report and receive instructions. With Scribe Ezra they investigate further and again return to the Council Chamber to report.

This is the last entrance and from this point the Council Chamber of the Sanhedrin gradually merges and becomes a Chapter Room and there the remaining ceremonial takes place. From all this it is clear that in presenting the Degree the different areas should be defined as clearly as possible or the Candidate will be bewildered. The areas may be defined thus:

First Entrance. This is the Chapter Room. The East (Sanhedrin) is veiled and the Candidate must not see the Officers robed and crowned. This he first does when he enters the Sanhedrin after passing the veils. Thus the Crown is removed before Z passes through the white veil to obligate the Candidate, and also he must not see the characters on the Altar, the Standards of the Tribes or the Zodiac Signs. This is Vault equipment.

Second Entrance. This is the approach and entry to the Sanhedrin and again no Vault equipment should be seen. The officers of the Sanhedrin are of course completely robed.

Third Entrance. The Candidate now enters the old Temple area and in due course the Vault beneath. It is desirable to keep the Vault hidden while he works amidst the ruins. Lighting and curtains will assist in this. A rheostat will allow the lighting to be increased for each descent. If possible the East should be left dim so that no emphasis is given to the Principal Officers. They are not part of the scene.

Fourth Entrance. We are now back in the Sanhedrin and in theory the Vault should be removed but that is not practicable. It must therefore be ignored.

Fifth Entrance. The site is once again the old Temple area, leading down into the Vault.

Sixth Entrance. The last entrance - it takes us back into the Sanhedrin, which soon merges into and becomes a Chapter Room. The Vault may now be left fully in view as the Candidate is experienced enough to understand its significance.

The key to the Degree and the ultimate secret of all Freemasonry is the discovery in the Vault of the Sacred Name, J.H.V.H. Up to this point the Candidate has had only moral lessons but suddenly he is left to find the true spiritual meaning of the Craft. It is a solemn moment, the greatest in all Freemasonry, when first he gazes on the Sacred Name. Later he learns that there his search has truly ended and Freemasonry has bared its final secret, the search for God Himself! Perhaps too he has found the original Mason Word, sacred and ineffable, the answer to the search that all men must make as they pass through life itself. With the Ineffable Name, unpronounceable to the orthodox Jew, it is the Royal Arch word, also secret for us.

When at last he comes to realise what he has found, the Candidate must know that his search has ended and that the true meaning of Masonry is revealed to him. He knows at last that the moral rules he has been taught do no more than lead him to the spiritual truths that are the ultimate teaching of the Craft.