

The Order of the Royal Arch

An Introduction for non-Royal Arch Masons

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First presented at Rotorua Royal Arch Chapter No 44

16 July 2009

A dilemma faces every Master Mason when he has been raised.

He has been informed, in his First Degree, that he should make every endeavour to make a daily advancement in Masonic knowledge, an exhortation which is reinforced in the preceding phrase when he is recommended to study those of the liberal arts and sciences which lie within his abilities. If he has listened diligently during his first degree, and subsequently thought about what he has heard, he will appreciate that the full scope of Masonic philosophy was outlined in the lecture of the First Degree Tracing Board: the three principal virtues of Faith, Hope and Charity; the four cardinal virtues of Temperance, Fortitude, Prudence and Justice; and that the distinguishing characteristics of a Freemason are Virtue, Honour and Mercy.

But he has also been informed in his Third Degree, which concentrates on his spiritual nature and in particular that aspect which relates to his mortality, that the genuine secrets of a Master Mason were lost by the death of just one person.

His dilemma is:

- Why should he extend his knowledge?
- How does he extend his knowledge of things Masonic?

The short answer to the question of why he should extend his knowledge is predicated on the basis of all education: that it is comprised of three parts

1. Knowledge
2. Experience
3. Personal development

He will know he has been given a little knowledge and has been brought to this point by his personal development. But he knows his experience, at least in a Masonic sense, is very limited.

There is a further reason although he might not be aware of it at this early stage in his Masonic development and experience. The preface to the Rules of the Constitution of the United Grand Lodge of England contains the following:

By the solemn Act of Union between the two Grand Lodges of Free-Masons of England in December 1813, it was 'declared and pronounced that pure Antient Masonry consists of three degrees and no more, viz., those of the Entered Apprentice, the Fellow Craft, and the Master Mason, including the Supreme Order of the Holy Royal Arch'.

At the Quarterly Communication of 10 December 2003 the United Grand Lodge of England acknowledged and pronounced the status of the Supreme Order of the Holy Royal Arch to be 'an extension to, but neither a superior nor a subordinate part of, the Degrees which precede it'.

Rule 71 of the Constitution of the Grand Lodge of New Zealand states:

Grand Lodge recognises only the degrees of Entered Apprentice, Fellowcraft, Master Mason, Mark Master, Excellent Master and the Royal Arch as being pure Antient Freemasonry.

These quotations from Supreme bodies – the United Grand Lodge of England which has *de facto* status as the recognizing authority of almost all Masonic organizations world-wide, and our own primary constitutional jurisdiction – seem to tell us that there is something more to Freemasonry than just Craft Masonry. So they reinforce the why and also give a pointer as to the how.

Obviously he can endeavour to study Freemasonry for himself. But that is a process that can be fraught: what should he study and how can he be sure that the information he gets is sound? Like many sources on the Internet (of which there are thousands), books, magazines and articles have to be treated with a certain circumspection, if not scepticism. Many of our well-meaning Brethren often present questionable material as fact because their own knowledge is limited.

For that reason alone the rituals of another Order offer perhaps a better and more reliable source of information.

So the question arises, if we are to look to other Orders for knowledge and understanding which should we consider? Which of them is best suited to furthering the understanding and knowledge which has been fostered by the three Craft Degrees?

The quotations above seem to suggest that the Royal Arch is perhaps the most appropriate. Why?

To understand the answer to that question it is necessary to understand how the form of Craft Masonry was developed during the Age of Enlightenment. It is quite clear

that the developers of the rituals of Speculative Freemasonry sought to de-Christianize it. Remember that this was a period of intense religious fervour – both Protestant and Catholic. Indeed that time, in the latter part of the 17th Century, was not far removed from the periods of religious persecution. A little over 400 years previously the last Grand Master of the Knights Templar, Jacques de Molay, was burnt at the stake by the Inquisition. 200 years previous it would have been extremely dangerous to have bucked the desires of Henry VIII and 100 years prior Oliver Cromwell was doing his best to crush the established religions. The developers had a desire to cater for men of all religious persuasions and to allow for freethinkers in their midst. So when the first Grand Lodge was formed in 1717, and when Dr James Anderson published his Constitutions in 1723, there was no mention of the New Testament. On the other hand many of the appendant Orders which have been developed since have drifted back towards Christianity reaching the possible ultimate in the Rose Croix, or Scottish Rite as it is known in other parts of the world, which is heavily dependent on the Gospel of St John.

Why then the Royal Arch?

It does not add any new philosophy to that which is taught in Craft Masonry. Rather it further explains and expounds on the basic philosophy and links much of that which has yet to be explained in Craft Masonry.

Indeed it is considered to be a more logical culmination to Craft Masonry than the Third Degree. Remember that in 1717 the ceremonial consisted of only two degrees corresponding to the operative masons' degrees of entered apprentice and fellow craft. According to Scottish documents, such as the Edinburgh Register House Manuscript, an Entered Apprentice was initiated into a Lodge and commenced his indentures which would take around 7 years to complete. At the conclusion of his training he was passed to the degree of Fellowcraft at which time he was enabled to practice his craft without supervision. In addition he was required to participate in the training of apprentices.

Laurence Gardner¹ writes:

“We shall also discover that a time-honored aspect of the Craft known as the Royal Arch Chapter holds the ultimate key to Freemasonry. Although the Chapter is optional to Brethren, it is within this particular ritual (as distinct from the three primary degrees) that the light of Masonic heritage truly shines – yet the all-important Royal Arch was totally ignored by the Grand Lodge establishment for 96 years from its foundation.”

Later he writes that when a Candidate enters a Lodge for the first time he is likened to the Rough Ashlar which will eventually become smoothed and perfected.

“It is at this stage that the prospect of being admitted to the ‘mysteries and privileges of ancient Freemasonry’ is potentially very exciting. Progressing through the three Craft degrees, however, concludes with the immensely disappointing Hiram legend, and it is not until one joins the Royal Arch Chapter that the excitement builds again – but this time with a better purpose.”

Gardner writes that Christopher Wren was as enthusiastic about the mathematical mystique of Solomon’s Temple as Isaac Newton and that, therefore, when Desaguliers became the Grand Master of the Moderns in 1719 it was little wonder that they focused on it.

“As a Fellow of the Royal Society he would have been fully aware of ongoing research from the society’s published Transactions. It was worth creating a whole new degree just to cement the new-style Freemasonry to this Solomon tradition – and that is precisely what happened after 1724, when the 3rd degree was formulated”

Unfortunately, writes Gardner, instead of developing the thrust of the first two degrees by incorporating Newtonian or other Temple philosophy, the fictitious legend of Hiram Abiff became the focus. But, he writes:

“... a rather more than adequate 3rd degree already existed. It was much older, and had evolved quite separately from Craft Freemasonry, with records of a Scottish working as far back as 1590 in Stirling. Laurence Dermott, Grand Secretary of the Antients, explained to the Moderns that he knew of this degree, which existed quite independently of the Craft, and that he firmly believed it to be the ‘the root, heart, and marrow of Freemasonry’, but he was ignored.”

Much later the Antients included it as a formal aspect of their ritual, in 1772, but the Moderns did not relent until after amalgamation in December 1813 – their own membership had applied pressure for something better than Hiram Abiff.

Gardner writes that Dermott had been correct – that it was indeed far more substantial than the established 3rd degree but that it was too late to make a substitution because to allow more than 3 degrees would, in effect, demote all the existing Master Masons. The Holy Royal Arch was therefore added as a Chapter extension of the 3rd degree to give the Craft brethren something of a culminating consequence.

Others more close to home have commented on the relevance of the Royal Arch in New Zealand. Kerry Dalzell² writes:

Various eminent New Zealand Freemasons have endeavoured to answer this question. I cannot do better than quote some of the more erudite writings.

C.G. Hedge wrote:

*"He should join the Royal Arch because:
It is part of Masonry and is so officially defined.
It enlarges his knowledge of the Most High and His goodness and honour.
Without it he is an incomplete Mason.
With it he has added the topmost stone and covered-in the building.
It adds another link in the Chain which binds him to his brethren."*

J.P. Glenie wrote:

"So our search is ended; we have found what all men seek. We know at last that Freemasonry leads to the Deity Himself: that first declaration we make in the first degree is now at last explained."

So, if the Royal Arch adds to the knowledge and understanding of Masonic Philosophy, how does it do it?

The most important point to understand is that the Order does not add to the philosophy which was introduced in the First Degree. What it does do, in three degree ceremonies, is answer questions which are left begging in the three Craft degrees.

The Craft ceremonies introduce to the Entered Apprentice the concept of a work ethic which is based on labour, accuracy and perseverance; to the Fellowcraft the necessity of supporting the work ethic of the First Degree with knowledge, understanding, justice and reward; and to the Master Mason a spirituality, particularly that associated with his mortality, and of loyalty and integrity. But he is also told that he cannot have the genuine secrets because the murder of one of the main protagonists in the building of King Solomon's Temple caused them to be lost.

What questions do the degree ceremonies of the Order address and how do they answer them?

The first of the three degrees of the Order – that of the Mark Master Mason – takes as its allegory the building of Solomon's Temple and works on the theme of the work ethic introduced in the First Degree. It shows the candidate how the work was controlled and the measures applied to the quality control and the role of Entered Apprentices and Fellow Crafts and part the latter played in the training of the former, and then it picks up on the concepts of merit and justice introduced in the Second Degree ultimately pointing out the importance of intellect in interpreting the designs implicit in the construction of a building.

The second of the three degrees, the Excellent Master, takes the candidate over 400 years into the future and considers the implications of the return from Babylon of the Jews taken captive after the sacking of Jerusalem by the army of Nebuchadnezzar. It describes how the work of building the second temple – that of Zerubbabel – was restricted to descendants of the Jews taken captive and how they were tested and controlled.

The third of the degrees – the Holy Royal Arch – describes events which took place during preparation for the foundations of the second temple.

Between them, these degrees tell the Craft Mason how the work force at the building of King Solomon's Temple was organized, trained, managed and paid, and how the quality control which ensured a sound, stable building was implemented. They describe the controls put in place to ensure that only descendants of the Jews taken into captivity by the Babylonians would work on the Second Temple. And they finally show how the lost secrets were recovered and the reason why the loss of just one man could prevent transmission of the secrets.

In other words they answer some questions which you as newly raised Master Masons may have pondered but never found the answers to.

- What was the true relationship between Entered Apprentice, Fellow Craft and Master Mason?
- Why is it that the degree of Master Mason does not guarantee him the right to sit in the chair of Master of a Lodge?
- Why does a Lodge have a Master and two Wardens?
- Was the Temple of King Solomon as indestructible as our allegories imply?

- Given that three men knew the secrets of a Master Mason – Solomon King of Israel, Hiram King of Tyre and Hiram Abiff – why did the loss of just one of those cause the loss of the secrets?
- Were the lost secrets ever found?

I cannot answer those questions now because in so doing I would undermine the intent and mystique of the degree ceremonies of the Order.

However if they are questions which have mystified you, and to which you would like answers then I can suggest the Order of the Royal Arch and its degree ceremonies will provide you with answers to them.

Above all I can ask probably the most serious question you will hear all evening. Are you, as a Craft Mason, entirely satisfied with substitute secrets? If you are not then the Royal Arch will provide you with the genuine ones. And as the catechism of the opening of a Lodge in the Third Degree suggests, by joining the Royal Arch you will have assisted in finding them by your own industry.

¹ Laurence Gardner "The Shadow of Solomon" Harper Element 2005 ISBN 13 978 0 00 720761 9, ISBN 10 0 00 720761 1, p 193.

² K.W. Dalzell, PAGDC, 1st Principal, Research Chapter of NZ No. 93, "The Craft and Royal Arch Masonry", a lecture presented to William Ferguson Massey Royal Arch Chapter No 61, 6 April 2009