

# **The Six Degrees of Freemasonry – An Introduction to the Royal Arch**

**By RE Comp Phil Ivamy at Marlborough Royal Arch 15<sup>th</sup> June, 2010**

## **Introduction**

The book of constitution of Freemasonry in NZ, rule 71, states that: “Grand Lodge recognises the following degrees, and no more, as being pure antient Masonry, viz; Entered Apprentice, Fellow Craft, Master Mason, Mark Master, Excellent Master and Holy Royal Arch”

As a mason you will be well aware of the first three degrees, but what about the other three – the Mark Master, Excellent Master and Royal Arch and why are they a part of Freemasonry according to our book of constitution?

This evening I hope to answer that question

## **Antient Freemasonry**

Speculative Freemasonry, as we know it today, is largely the result of the union of two rival factions that came together to form the United Grand Lodge of England in 1813. The ritual resulting from this union is basically the same as we now practice it today, with the exception of minor alterations over time in accordance with the times, such as the removal of the traditional penalties in the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the traditional penalty is usually referred to only, however some lodges still spell out the penalties.

The first three degrees as you are probably aware involve an initiation into the order, moralizing and then the peculiar legend of Hiram Abiff, where the candidate is made to represent said person.

Briefly the first three degrees can be summarized thus:

The Entered Apprentice degree is the first and perhaps the most memorable as it is often the first taste for the individual of a modern initiation into any organisation. In times of old initiation was a paramount part of growth as an individual, especially initiation into maturity. The initiation into the Entered Apprentice degree is also an initiation into maturity, a spiritual maturity. Perhaps for the first time there is a glimpse for the candidate of something bigger than the self in a very real perspective. Also awakened within the individual is a very effective call on his charity. In the first degree the candidate is made to

look outside himself and to consider both charity towards his fellow man and his relationship to his God. It is a degree of birth, or rebirth.

The Fellow Craft degree is of a more practical nature referring as it does to the hidden mysteries of nature and science; it is in essence teaching us how to “be” as human beings, as men in the middle years of our life. It is a degree that teaches of life and living, and is a bridge from the Operative Masonry to the Speculative Freemasonry to be found in the third degree.

The Master Masons degree... is the newest of the three degrees coming into life in approximately 1725 possibly as a result of a number of exposures of the workings of the craft. It is from this degree that our real identity as freemasons derives. In this degree the candidate is made to represent the quasi biblical character of Hiram Abiff, who through his unshaken fidelity in keeping the sacred trust reposed in him lost is life to ruffians. Perhaps this can be taken to mean that by an unshaken belief and trust in that something bigger than ourselves, i.e. God, and avoiding the easy options of a more secular life without a spiritual dimension or element of faith, we are able to overcome the trappings of our physical body and attain unity with that God we revere.

These, then, are the three degrees we all know and love (unless you are trying to remember the ritual!)

But what of the other three degrees that are part and parcel of antient freemasonry. How came they to be there and what are they?

## **Royal Arch**

This is the obvious place to start as it is the only additional set of degrees recognized by the Grand Lodge, the ultimate degree of which came about in its modern form, by way of the compromises resulting from the union of the Antients and the Moderns in England in 1813.

The Royal Arch, like craft masonry, consists of three degrees, namely Mark Master (founded 1769), Excellent Master (1740's) and Holy Royal Arch (1745). It is worth bearing in mind that our Royal Arch degree working is derived from the Scottish working rather than the English.

A peculiarity of the Royal Arch is that each of the three degrees is controlled by a different person in the chair; for the Mark degree the lodge is controlled by the Worshipful Mark Master, for the Excellent

degree the lodge is controlled by the Worshipful Excellent Master, and for the Royal Arch degree the lodge is controlled by the Very Excellent 1<sup>st</sup> Principal. The officers taking the Worshipful Mark Master and Worshipful Excellent Master positions are equivalent to the Junior & Senior Wardens respectively. Unlike craft masonry the Royal Arch Chapters (equivalent to the lodge) are opened in the senior degree where general business is worked.

Each of the degrees tell a very interesting allegorical story –

The **Mark Master** degree is concerned with the building of the first temple around 974BC, in which the candidate represents a fellow craft mason who constructs and discovers a key part of the building of the Arch in King Solomon's temple. In this degree the candidate devises his own "mark" for each stone he fashions – hence the name of the degree. The use of a Mason's Mark is ancient with marks being found at the base of Cleopatra's needle, and medieval Cathedrals.

It is of interest to know that whereas in NZ this degree forms the first step in the Red degrees towards the Royal Arch, in England the degree is stand alone having its own Grand Lodge of Mark Master Masons. If you look at the degree as it relates to the others of the series - Excellent and Royal Arch degrees you will see it doesn't. The latter two degrees are centred on the rebuilding of the temple by Zerubbabel, not the building of the original King Solomon's Temple.

The Mark degree essentially completes, and is a partner of the fellow craft degree, and along with the Operative degrees dramatise the actual working in the quarries. It emphasizes the work ethic of the Entered Apprentice degree, that labour, diligence and effort combined with an understanding of the grand design are essential for further philosophical and spiritual growth.

An essential lesson of this degree is that just because something is discarded it does not necessarily become less valuable. It illustrates a shining example of how a man needs to pursue his direction if it is the correct direction, regardless of the opinions of others.

The need to maintain one's belief in the face of adversity and the suppression of superiors is dramatised. A lesson we could all learn from.

Another lesson contained within this degree is that all men are entitled to, and will receive equal reward. In essence this reward is a spiritual

reward, whereby the diligent application of hard labour will be rewarded by spiritual growth.

In the **Excellent** Master degree we move ahead in time 470 years (according to the ritual) to 537BC and we hear of the preparations surrounding the return from captivity by the chosen people (in the intervening years KST has been destroyed and the survivors taken away to Babylon). Where the candidate represents one who will return to Jerusalem with the passwords and signs gained in Babylon, the land of captivity.

It is worth noting that this degree is not often practiced in England, where it is known as the “Passing of the Veils”

The central theme within this degree is the passing through three of the four veils and understanding their symbolism. In the degree the veils in order are Blue, Purple, Scarlet and White with their assigned symbols being – Blue: Air, Purple: Water, Scarlet: Fire and White: Earth. This symbolism needs not be elaborated on as the degree explains why these colours are chosen; however it is useful to note that these four elements were once believed to be all the elements in existence, with everything else being derived from these. They are the four elements from which we are all derived.

There is a large amount of further symbolism both astrological and biblical.

All of the varied interpretations of the veils all have one thing in common; they represent a journey, a spiritual journey either that of a Jew, a Christian, a mystic, or an alchemist. In fact they all have the same destination – that of a Philosophers Stone, the growth and actualization of the spiritual being.

Furthermore we are taught the lesson of patience and perseverance to rebuild upon the ruins of the former temple in order to reach the Almighty Architect.

Whereas in the **Royal Arch** degree the candidate takes part in clearing the debris from the destruction to start building the second temple, in so doing an Arch is discovered leading to the discovery of the Word that was lost by the untimely death of our master Hiram Abiff in the Master Masons degree.

This degree is a degree of threes – a number often thought of the “total”; being the sum of the odd and even, the masculine and feminine etc. The number three is found throughout the degree.

From a spiritual perspective these threes could be the Father, Son and Holy Ghost or the mind, the body and the soul. Thereby giving a New Testament leaning to what is clearly an Old Testament working.

This representation is further illustrated if we look at the journey of the sojourners; they are returning from the land of Babylon to Jerusalem. Babylon was a place of excess and of plenty, very much a place of the flesh and the material world. Jerusalem, however, is their spiritual home. Thus we see their journey as a spiritual quest

The Royal Arch degree is also, perhaps, a degree of rebirth or a new cycle in that we are entering into the place of demise of the old temple in our quest to build a new spiritual temple...

From the above it can be seen that while the degree of antient freemasonry concern the birth, life and death of man the further degrees of the Royal Arch series are concerned more with the spiritual development of that man. Perhaps this is best illustrated by the fact that the substituted secrets of the third degree are replaced with the genuine secrets in the Royal Arch degree. And just what are those secrets? It would be fair to say that the secrets of the Royal Arch degree are the secrets behind all of freemasonry. Please bear in mind that these are philosophical secrets – not Actual secrets, as in all facets of freemasonry the secrets are those of recognition only; the secrets I refer to are the hidden lessons within the workings.

But to really find out their meaning and worth it is necessary for a candidate to actively take part in the degree working...