**Veils**

**Introduction**

Right from the beginning of our Masonic journey we encounter references to veils albeit that the first reference is to things being “veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols”. Later on as we travel through our Royal Arch degrees we see the mixed heritage of our Scottish based NZ ritual. From that and the Irish side we get the veils, as we know them in the Excellent Degree.

Progressing onwards through other degrees we encounter residuals of the ceremonial development of the mid to late 1700’s with the so-called chivalric degrees. We see such reference to the Christian components through such as the Rose Croix rituals and ceremonies. Here we have references to the “hour when the veil of the temple was rent in twain”. Similar references to veils appear in other degrees such as the Red Cross of Constantine. Here and in some other instances we have the concept of veils as a covering where during the passage of the candidate through the first 3 barriers of the Excellent Degree he wears a veil or covering. But more of that later.

**Background.**

As mentioned before our Royal Arch series of degrees derives for our Irish & Scottish heritage. While the Mark Degree of the English constitution is very similar to that we see in NZ for reasons of how it developed from a Scottish background but that is another story and the Royal Arch ceremony differs between all three. Our Royal Arch ceremony is virtually the Scottish one with some adaptations. Then we have the Excellent Degree.

We take this part of our Royal Arch Journey principally from the Scottish Constitution antecedence of our NZ Ritual as a separate degree as for the Irish it is part of a preliminary to the Royal Arch Degree itself much like the Mark Man portion is of the Mark Degree.

The English Constitution as a whole doesn’t recognise the Excellent Degree although it is found as part of the Bristol workings, which possibly reflects that city’s role as a seaport and terminus for shipping from both Ireland and Scotland.

**Origin of the veils:**

Our reference to the veils, their colour and use clearly comes from the Tabernacle of the Israelites. In particular the references are found in Exodus – which I will quote in part as chapter 25 outlines the offerings, the ark & table while 26 refers to the veils, coverings & tent and 27 to the altar on which the burnt offerings are made.

Josephus also refers to the veils in the same connection in his Book Antiquities of the Jews at 3:7:7.

Thus we have a physical difference between biblical references to the veils and how we tend to utilise them. Firstly we have their arrangement and also how their colours are displayed.

**The Setting**

As mentioned before the setting for this degree is in Babylon and by implication occurs in the remaining tabernacle as we are told that the “you didn’t enter the white veil as the Sanhedrin had already departed for Jerusalem.” *You have now arrived at the white veil, indicating the entrance to the Sanhedrin. The colour is emblematical of purity and innocence, which virtues should characterise every E.M., as they are most essential to our admittance to the S.S. or H. of H. above*”

The word tabernacle means a tent. It is the diminutive of the Latin word taberna, and was used by the Romans to denote a soldier's tent. It was constructed of planks and covered with skins, and its outward appearance presented the accepted form of the Jewish Tabernacle.

The Hebrews sometimes called it mishcan, which, like the Latin taberna, meant a dwelling-place, but more commonly as an ohel, which meant a tent similarly to the Latin tabernaculum. In shape it resembled a tent, and is supposed to have derived its form from the tents used by the Patriarchs during their nomadic life.

The Tabernacle itself was, according to Josephus, forty-five feet long by fifteen wide; its greater length being from East to West. The sides were fifteen feet high, and there was a sloping roof.

There was no aperture or place of entrance except at the eastern end, which was covered by curtains. Internally, the Tabernacle was divided into two apartments by a richly decorated curtain. The one at the western end was fifteen feet long, making, therefore, a perfect cube. This was the Holy of Holies, into which no one entered, not even the High Priest, except on extraordinary occasions. In it was placed the Ark of the Covenant, against the western wall.

The Holy of Holies was separated from the Sanctuary by a curtain embroidered with figures of Cherubim, and supported by four golden pillars. The Sanctuary, or eastern apartment, was in the form of a double cube, being fifteen feet high, fifteen feet wide, and thirty feet long. In it were placed the Table of Shewbread on the northern side, the Golden Candlestick on the southern, and the Altar of Incense between them.

A brief diversion though to partially describe the Cherubim who in the bible are represented as figures of peculiar form, each having four heads, that of a man, of a lion, of an ox and of an eagle, all attached to the human body with four wings, and four hands under the wings, and with feet resembling those of an ox. Cherubim symbolise the protecting care of the Deity

The Tabernacle thus constructed was decorated with rich curtains. These were of four colours -white or fine-twined linen, blue, purple, and red. They were suspended so as to cover the sides and top of the tabernacle, not being distributed as veils separating it into apartments, as in the Masonic Tabernacle. Josephus, in describing the symbolic signification of the Tabernacle, says that it was an imitation of the system of the world; the Holy of Holies, into which not even the Priests were admitted, was axis it were a heaven peculiar to God; but the Sanctuary, where the people were allowed to assemble for worship, represented the sea and land on which men live.

The veil of the tabernacle was hung between the holy place and the holiest of all. Inside of it were the Ark of the Covenant, the mercy seat, and the cherubim; outside were the golden altar of incense, the golden candlestick, or lamp-stand, and the table of shew-bread or “presence-bread,” the twelve loaves that were placed before Jehovah.

Properly there were three veils or curtains for the tabernacle.

The outermost hung at the entrance of the tabernacle; and was always drawn aside, or might be so by any Israelite that wished to pass into the outer court, where the brazen altar and brazen laver were. That veil hindered no one, and concealed nothing. It was an ever-open door; at which any Israelite might come in with his sacrifice. It was at this door that the priest met the comer and examined his sacrifice to see if it were without blemish; for no blemished offering could pass the threshold; and the bringer of a blemished sacrifice must go back unaccepted and un-blest. The Priest rejected him and his victim. He must go and get another bullock, or else bear his own sin[[1]](#endnote-1)

The second veil hung at the entrance of the holy place. It allowed any one to look in; but it prohibited the entrance of all but Priests. “Now when these things were thus ordained (arranged or set up) the priests went always (were continually going) into the first tabernacle (what we usually call the second), accomplishing the service of God” (Heb. 9:6). They fed at the royal table there; they kept the lamps burning; they put incense on the golden altar. But they could enter no farther.

The third veil hung before the holy of holies: hiding God from man and man from God, and intimat­ing that the day of full meeting and fellowship had not yet come. It said to Israel, God is within; but you cannot enter now. The time is coming; but it is not yet.

**The Coverings:**

In Exodus 26:1 we learn that the tabernacle had ten curtains of fine woven linen. Therefore it was the curtains that made the tabernacle (Mishkan). The Mishkan was a wooden framework with the linen material spread over it to form a tent. While Exodus chapter 40 talks of the tabernacle being erected and in verse 18/19 "So Moses raised up the tabernacle, fastened its sockets, set up its boards, put in its bars, and raised up its pillars. And he spread out the tent over the tabernacle and put the covering of the tent on top of it as the Lord had commanded Moses."

Here the curtain and the first covering are together called the tent. This tent was spread over the erected boards or tabernacle, thus if the boards/panels were solid it would mean the embroidery on the curtain would not be seen giving added argument to the idea of a framework of wood with the embroidered cherubim visible in each opening in the frame.

There were four coverings, 2 curtains and 2 further coverings: -

**The Inner Coverings Or Curtains: -** Which formed the "MISHKAN" or the tabernacle proper – these in turn comprised

**The Curtain Of Linen**

There were ten curtains made of fine-woven white linen, with blue, purple and scarlet threads running through it. All of which were embroidered with the figures of cherubim (Ex. 26:1-6). Each curtain was 28 cubits x 4 cubits making a total of 28 cubits across and 40 cubits from front to back. The ten curtains were sewn into two sets each of 28 x 20 cubits and these two sets were coupled together with 50 blue loops on each joined by 50 gold clasps. This joint would have been sited above the altar of incense or the pillars of the veil.

The dwelling was 30 x 10 cubits meaning the curtain covered the roof and the two sides, plus the back. Along the sides it hung down 9 cubits till it met the silver bases of the framework, which made up the remaining cubit, which would also mean that the curtain was not dragged.

**The Goats Hair Covering Or Curtain**

Over the linen curtain was spread the goats hair covering making up the tent itself as referred to in Exodus 40:19. It consisted of eleven curtains of30 cubits x 4 cubits each. Ten of the curtains then made a covering 30 cubits across and 40 cubits from front to back. Again the curtain was sewn into two sets but this time the two sets of 50 loops were joined by 50 bronze clasps. The eleventh curtain doubled over at the front giving a total length of 42 cubits front to back. At the side and the back the goats hair covering extended loosely to the ground, where it was fixed by bronze pegs (Ex. 27:19). At the front the goats’ hair covering that was doubled extended 2 cubits from each side and the top concealing 4 of the pillars and the edges and top of the door of the holy place.

**The Outer Coverings**: in turn formed the "OHEL" the large tent that spread over it thus protecting it from the sun and rain.

The covering mentioned in Exodus 40:19 was put over the top of the tent (the curtains or tabernacle proper.). These coverings were a weatherproof protection to the tabernacle and were held in place by bronze pins or possibly cords and pins fixing them to the ground.The outward view could therefore have been that of a simple Bedouin tent.

**The colours:**

The one aspect that all writers seem to concur on is the 3 primary colours of the veils i.e. blue, purple and red or scarlet. But they don’t agree whether they are strung separately or as is indicated in several areas to have been intertwined or braided with the cherubim embroidered thereon. As has been suggested to me by a learned companion perhaps they were woven together much like a rope or rainbow.

Exodus details the materials used to construct the Mishkan (aka Tabernacle). They include blue, purple, and scarlet fabric (or thread), goat hair, and skins. This isn't just an assembly manual. Each element has spiritual significance. For example, the gold represents righteousness and perfection. Silver represents blood and redemption. Bronze or brass represents judgment, and iron represents power and force.

For one observer it seemed that blue, purple, and scarlet might actually correspond to the metals gold, bronze, and silver. Blue--being associated with Heaven, purity, and obedience--and scarlet--being associated with blood and redemption--correlate fairly well. Purple not so well.

**Blue**

Blue is a colour that is found frequently in scripture with the Hebrew word 'tekeleth' translated as blue. It signifies a spectrum of blue from sky blue (Josephus) to a deep dark blue, but can also indicate violet

In conjunction with precious stones, the sky blue colour of sapphire represents heavenly things: "And above the firmament over their heads was the likeness of a throne, in appearance like a sapphire stone" Ezek 1:26

Blue is also associated with the commandments of God, the importance of remembering them and also the heavenly calling of those who had been chosen by God to be His people (Numbers 15:38-40).

The Ark of the Covenant in the Tabernacle was covered with blue cloth representing its close association with the Word of God (Numbers 4:5-7; 11-13).

The robe of the High Priest was also blue, again symbolising the close association with God and His Word (Exodus 28:31-33).

**Purple**

The colour Purple in scripture is translated from the Hebrew and we see also "You shall make a veil woven of blue, purple, and scarlet thread, and fine woven linen. It shall be woven with an artistic design of cherubim." Exod 26:31

The Greek word 'porphura', which refers to purple and the species of shellfish murex or mussel from which the dye colour is derived. This species was relatively rare and thus the purple dye was valuable.

The colour purple is associated with royalty and status for example: "So Mordecai went out from the presence of the King in royal apparel of blue and white, with a great crown of gold and a garment of fine linen and purple; and the city of Shushan rejoiced and was glad." Esther 8:15

**Scarlet**

The Hebrew word 'towla' (Masculine) and 'towle' (feminine) means scarlet or crimson. The Hebrew word 'karmiyl' means crimson, red or carmine. The Hebrew word 'shaniy' means scarlet or crimson. 'Shaniy' signifies the colour obtained from the insect ‘coccus ilicis’. The dried body of the female provides a colouring matter from which dye can be made and then used to colour cloth scarlet or crimson.

Each colour in the Tabernacle construction had a meaning of its own and both crimson and scarlet are associated with sin. For example God says to His people Israel through the prophet Isaiah: "Come now, and let us reason together," Says the LORD, "Though your sins are like scarlet, They shall be as white as snow; Though they are red like crimson, They shall be as wool." Isa 1:18

Scarlet was the colour of the cord that Rahab was told to display from her window if she and her family were to be saved when Jericho was destroyed (Joshua 2:17-21)

In the Song of Solomon scarlet is used in the description of the beauty of the bride where we read "Your lips are like a strand of scarlet." (Song 4:1-5)

The colour scarlet is also associated with cleansing and purification as referred to in Leviticus 14:4 "Then the priest shall command to take for him who is to be cleansed two living and clean birds, cedar wood, scarlet, and hyssop."

**Masonic symbolism of the colours of The Veils**

The Lecture of the Excellent degree tells us “*When the children of Israel came out of Egypt they dwelt in tents in the wilderness, and Moses, by divine command and assisted by Bezaleel and Aholiab erected a tabernacle which was devoted to solemn worship offered up to the Most High. This Tabernacle was not more than fifty feet long, eighteen feet wide and eighteen feet high, and was covered with curtains or veils of blue, purple, scarlet and white linen. These colours typically represent the elements: blue being the emblem of the sky or air; purple of the sea as being tinged with the blood of the Murex; scarlet of fire; and white of the earth because flax, from which linen is made, springs from it*.”

Two of the most beautiful charges in our whole Royal Arch set of degrees occur at the end of the Excellent and Royal Arch degrees respectively. Both put into context the respective degrees and you will note in both little reference to the Mark Degree. Recall that the location of this Excellent Degree is set in Babylon and equips the sojourners with the signs tokens and words with which they will prove themselves when they arrive in Jerusalem. But this address draws our attention to its “moral signification” with which at some stage I suggest that you consider again for yourself.

At the conclusion of the Excellent Degree the candidate is then not only admitted as an equal but as is common in our Masonic Ceremonies has much of the symbolism outlined for him in the Address. However, as with those other degrees regrettably by this time the candidate is suffering overload and probably takes little of this symbolism on board and thus it’s meaning is largely lost even on the audience who are thinking ahead to refectory.

For us this charge tells of the symbolism of the veils and I can do no better than repeat a portion of it:

**The address in the Excellent Degree tells us that:**

*To enter the Lodge you pass through the blue veil. Blue is a symbol of royalty and reminds us that upon our entry into this mortal life we are descendants of the God King Himself, and possessors of that princely heritage an immortal life implying hope and faith.*

*Proceeding onward we pass through the purple and scarlet veils, emblems of water and tire. During life's journey we are tried as it were by water and by fire.*

*If through intolerance, conceit, lust, selfishness, vainglory or pride, we do not survive the test, we must not be discouraged but accept it as a sign from the A.A. that our work is not in accordance with His plans and designs*

Not surprisingly we use different explanations of these colours in different parts of the ritual of which the following may suffice for each:

**Blue**:

At the veil the candidate is told that “*Blue, the colour of the first veil is appropriated to the first three or symbolic Degrees, and is emblematical of universal friendship and benevolence. It therefore teaches us that those virtues should be as expansive in the breast of every Mason as the blue vault of Heaven itself.”*

At the Installation of the Principals the words of the investiture with the robe then the address to the Third Principal include:

“Your Robe, the colour of which is blue, is emblematical of Universal Benevolence and Friendship, and teaches us that in the mind of a Freemason those virtues should be as expansive as the Blue Vault of Heaven itself” and then

“The colour of the Robe with which you are invested is blue, which is one of the most beautiful and durable in nature. It is the appropriate colour adopted and worn by our Ancient Brethren in Craft Masonry, and is the distinguishing characteristic of our institution, having stood the test of ages, and Freemasonry like the colour of your robe is as much distinguished by the durability of its principles as is by the whole superstructure. This the Robe you are now entitled to wear is emblematical of every grace and virtue that can adorn and beauty the human heart.”

Thus the colour Blue refers to basic morality of principles and the Golden Rule.

**Purple**

Again at the Second veil we have: *The colour of the second veil is purple, which is the union of blue and scarlet. Hence it is an emblem of unity and concord, and is intended to remind us of the intimate connection between Symbolic Masonry and the Degree of the H.RA*

And in the Investiture then Address to the Second Principal we have:

“*The Purple robe with which you are invested is an emblem of unity, purple being formed by the union of the colours red and blue, which are the accepted and appropriate colours of the Royal Arch and the Craft Degrees.* “ and

*“The Purple robe with which you are invested is an emblem of unity, and is calculated to remind you that the harmony and unanimity of the Chapter should be your constant aim,”*

A true message of brotherly love in its widest sense.

**Red/Scarlet**

*Scarlet, the colour of the third veil, is emblematical of that fervency and zeal which should actuate all R.A. Masons, and is peculiarly characteristic of that degree*.

And likewise from the Investiture and then Address to the First Principal

“The Scarlet robe is an emblem of imperial dignity” and

*“The Scarlet Robe, an emblem of imperial dignity should remind you of the paternal concern you should ever feel in the welfare of your Chapter, and with which you should endeavour to promote its prosperity.”*

Thus scarlet is an emblem of power and authority yet having in its train the responsibility to use that power for the better good of all members.

One final word (or more) – the Banners of the Royal Arch are generally colour coded with the 4 principal ones of the tribes of Judah (the lion) being white; Dan (the eagle) being blue; Reuben (man) purple and Ephraim (the ox) scarlet.

**The meanings of the signs, tokens and words of the veils:**

In my talk on “Excellent words” I cover these so for the want of boring you further I will leave this aspect to another time.

However we tend to avoid reference to the fourth veil and the whiteness of its purity being derived from fine twined linen or flax – rather different to our New Zealand flax I would point out. The ritual has “You did not pass through the white veil this evening because the scene of this Degree is in B. where there was no San., it having already set out from B. and arrived at Jerusalem”

In the final address in the Royal Arch Degree we see the moral symbolism of these 2 degrees:

*When first we enter the world, and discover around us the effects of the artifice of the tempter in the garden and when we behold him transformed into a serpent, we have passed the first veil of our existence.*

*At the close of life, when we are called from this probationary scene and are prostrated by the pallid leprosy of death, the second veil is drawn behind us.*

*In the morning of the resurrection, when the slumbering ashes shall revive and we learn that the words of the woman of Tekoah are untrue - when she declares that we are as water spilt upon the ground and cannot be gathered up - then shall the third veil be parted before us*

**Conclusion:**

The meaning and symbolism of the veils can in some ways be found in the part of the final address in the Royal Arch degree where we are told: *Therefore, my Companions, if, in all these things, you have seen only a series of unmeaning rites, if the Spirit of Truth has not applied to your hearts the moral of these ceremonies, then indeed, we have laboured in vain and you have spent your strength for nought.*

Thanks

A L Hart, G Lec

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1. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)