

Published by the Supreme Grand Royal Arch Chapter of New Zealand.

24 March 2014

Symbolism of the Mark Master, Excellent Master and Royal Arch Degrees.

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Mark Master Degree

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.

It should be remembered 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 Excellent and Royal Arch degrees you will see it doesn't. The latter two degrees are centred on the rebuilding of the temple, not the building of KST.

This degree essentially completes the fellow craft degree, and along with the Operative degrees dramatise the actual working in the quarries.

It is worth remembering that in fact the Mark Master degree is, in fact, two degrees; firstly that of the Mark Man, where you learn to make your mark; and secondly that of Mark Master Mason being more in line with the development of the Fellowcraft degree and its officers.

An essential lesson of this degree is that just because something is discarded (the Keystone) it does not necessarily become less valuable. The keystone was deliberately tossed into the rubble by the workmen under the instructions of expert Master Overseer, the head of the Overseers. Whereas it is the craftsman who executed the design on the stone who then discovers it amongst the rubble.

This is a shining example of how a man needs to pursue his direction if it is the correct direction, regardless of the opinions of the experts. This does not mean disobeying the instructions of those in a place of instruction over you, but maintaining faith in executing the designs in the knowledge that right will win out. Remembering that the Mark Man did obey the Overseers and discarded the stone, however it was he who then located it amongst the rubble.

The need to maintain ones belief in the face of adversary and the suppression of superiors is dramatised. In this circumstance the craftsman had the intuitive knowledge of the stone and its location in the face of the ignorance of the Master Overseer.

Another lesson contained within this degree is that all men are entitled and will receive equal reward. This is demonstrated in the degree in the fact that all men line up to receive their reward, be it a penny or a peppermint! In essence this reward is a spiritual reward, whereby the diligent application of hard labour will be rewarded by spiritual growth.

A further lesson is that of accuracy – the accurate completion of the keystone to the design ensured that it is fit for the job.

The Keystone that the craftsman has diligently worked on contains further symbolism. The stone has an angle of 30°, 1/12th of a circle and as such would represent one of the signs of the zodiac – currently we are leaving the sign of Pisces (the fish representing Jesus – the "fisher of men"); two thousand years ago we were leaving the sign of Aries (the lamb again Jesus the "lamb of god"); we are now entering Aquarius (perhaps we will adapt the Christian Church to a water symbol – however this would be a massive turnaround given that water is a feminine symbol; however Aquarius is a very new age symbol).

The overall lesson being that we ought to use our mental faculties to test the validity of the task at hand, and having decided on the course of action, the necessity of seeing it through to completion, in spite of adversity, to the best of our skill and ability.

Thus we can see that as well as being a very entertaining and interactive degree the Mark degree is both deeply symbolic and contains many morals to reflect upon.

Excellent Master Degree

In the **Excellent** Master degree we move ahead in time from the Mark Master Degree 450 years 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, after the decree of Cyrus was given effect by Darius.

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.

Depending on what you read there is other symbolisms to be derived from these veils –

Old Testament sensibilities hold that the Blue veil would be the tribe of Dan; the Purple the tribe of Reuben; the Scarlet the tribe of Ephraim and the White the tribe of Judah.

Represented by Blue: Eagle; Purple: Man; Scarlet: Bull and White: Lion; this ought to be borne out by the banners used by our Royal Arch Chapter.

These representations lead on to astrological symbols as follows: Blue: Scorpio (an astrological equivalent of the Eagle); Purple: Aquarius (The water carrier – man); Scarlet: Taurus (the bull); and White: Leo (the Lion)

Whereas a New Testament scholar would represent the four gospels thus – Blue: John; Purple: Matthew; Scarlet: Luke and White: Mark.

All of these 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.

Whether the journey is that of an inward spiritual journey or a real life sojourn there is a need for patience and determination in order to see it through.

Royal Arch Degree

In the **Holy Royal Arch** degree the candidate, a sojourner from Babylon, 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 throughout the degree – we have three principals, the three parts of the Grand Word; the three sojourners, etc.

If we look at the three principals we see that Zerubbabel represents the Body, Haggai the Mind and Jeshua the Spirit.

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. Indeed the sufferings of those traveling from Babylon to Jerusalem on their spiritual quest is further illustrated in the “Red Cross of Babylon/Babylonish Pass” side degree.

This 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.

This is indeed a degree of completion – it is both a completion of the travel through the veils into the Sanhedrin, the completion of the Holy Royal Arch but also, larger than that it is the completion of the three degrees of

Antient Freemasonry with the discovery of the genuine secrets that supplant those substituted secrets of the third degree. Further to this it is the completion of the journey that began in the first degree with the birth of the man, the second degree is the growth of that man, the third degree is the death of that man in the hope of a spiritual resurrection; in the Royal Arch degree with the genuine secrets of a mason that man is assured of that resurrection with the discovery that the three fold name of God indicating the trinity.

Also of interest are the circumstances around how the Royal Arch degree became a part of freemasonry as recognised by the Grand Lodges of NZ and UGLE. In your daily advance of Masonic knowledge you would perhaps have come across the division in England in 1753 between the Moderns and the Antients. A division that was healed in 1813 with the reuniting of the two grand lodges in what we now refer to as the United Grand Lodge of England. One of the factors in the division was the fact that the Antients to a large degree adopted and practiced the working of the Holy Royal Arch degree, which became part of the attraction of the Antients workings. And it was their insistence that the Royal Arch remain that ensured it's recognition by the newly formed UGLE, and by default by our own Grand Lodge.