

## The Royal Arch Degree as Myth

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In this paper I hope to delve into the Royal Arch degree, to see if the degree fulfills the elements of myth, and if it does where does that leave us?

To begin - The Royal Arch Degree can be briefly summarised as follows - In the **Holy Royal Arch** degree the candidate, a sojourner from Babylon, takes part in clearing the debris from the destruction of King Solomon's Temple 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.

So far, so good, now what about myths?

Myths are important legends that are more than stories as they contribute more than just entertainment value – they add to the commonality and make the community richer for the information they impart.

According to one Masonic writer myth is “an ancient and effective way of conveying truths about life to the receptive and properly prepared mind” (Lomas P58).

Myths contain important communal information and the allegories contain hidden knowledge for those that wish to scratch deeper beneath the very entertaining surface.

As man has developed and evolved he has placed great importance on ritual and ceremonies. But when man entered the scientific age he has largely done away with ritual, and I believe that, whether he knows it or not, he has lost something important as a result. Whereas traditionally there would be a coming of age initiation ritual amongst men, there is very little these days to mark the growth and development of a man. This is an area where masonry fills a noticeable void. Each important step we take in our Masonic career, from the 1<sup>st</sup> degree to the Royal Arch degree and beyond, is marked with an impressive and memorable ceremony or ritual. While being a pleasant memory I wonder if it also serves a sub conscious need we have as a species.

Joseph Campbell, a world renowned researcher and author on the power of the myth states that myths serve four purposes:

Firstly the ‘Mystical’ function, which serves to awaken and maintain in the individual a sense of awe and gratitude in relation to the mystery dimension of the universe, so that he recognizes and participates in it

The second function of a living mythology is to offer an image of the universe that will be in accord with the knowledge of the time, the science and the fields of action of the folk to whom the mythology is addressed

The third function is to validate, support and imprint the norms of a given, specific moral order, that, namely, of the society in which the individual is to live.

The fourth is to guide him, stage by stage, in health, strength, and harmony of spirit, through the whole foreseeable course of a useful life.

Taking each of these functions in order we see that -

Firstly – the mystical function is amply illustrated by the recovery of the three fold word of the degree – both this and Jehovah referring to the divinity.

The second function sets the working of the Royal Arch degree firmly in the Old Testament framework – and is of its time – firstly in its setting in 500BC, but also as an 18<sup>th</sup> Century reenactment of Old testament stories in order to reinforce morals of the day.

Third – social norms. The norms that we aspire to live by are demonstrated by the dedication of the sojourners in sticking to the task at hand, in accepting the lowest work in the Lords service, and other such virtues are rewarded by the recovery of that which was lost.

The fourth function, that of providing a guide for the participant and the observer to live by are greatly illustrated both in the earlier degrees – for example, the keystone making the Arch whole in the Mark Master

degree; and the Royal Arch degree, for instance reestablishing the book of the law, and the lost word in the Royal Arch degree give all thinking and feeling men a guide to life this life by and beyond.

This mythical interpretation 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 are further illustrated in the “Red Cross of Babylon/Babylonish Pass” side degree. The mythical purpose of norms to live by and a guide for his development are amply portrayed here.

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 Royal Arch degree is 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 recovery of the genuine secrets of a Freemason that man is assured of that resurrection with the discovery that the three fold name of God indicating the trinity.

The proliferation of threes within the degree is perhaps an ingenious way of tying the setting of this Old Testament working with the Trinity of the New Testament. Giving a little extra for those of the Christian faith to contemplate on, not at the expense of other belief systems, however.

Myths have become sidelined as we become increasingly secular and scientifically driven, a move which has seen our society becoming increasingly alienated and fragmented. This highlights a gap in our societies make up, an indication that something is missing and that we need something more. A spiritual something.

And that is where the Royal Arch working comes in. The Royal Arch working is indeed a mystic and spiritual quest, based on all that is best in myth, leading to the way back from whence we have come – i.e. union with our maker.

## **Bibliography**

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