

THE EXCELLENT DEGREE

By M E Comp A B Christensen, Grand Z March, 1954.

The Excellent Degree forms, as it were, a bridge between Craft and Royal Arch Freemasonry, the link between the physical and the spiritual realms. For Craft Freemasonry concentrates its attention on the perfection of character, of which King Solomon's Temple is the symbol while in Royal Arch Freemasonry we are led into vastly higher conception of our duties to each other, and our relationship to the Creator a conception which comes much easier when we have developed the finer attributes of character to a satisfactory level. Thus it is in the building of the Second Temple that the expected revelation may materialise, and it is in the opening prayer of this Degree that we are given a direct clue as to the nature and design of our work in the Royal Arch. " Since sin has destroyed within us the first temple of purity and innocence do Thou guide and assist us in building a second temple by reformation, so that when the veil of this earthly tabernacle shall be drawn aside we may be received into that sanctuary where Thou livest and reignest for ever." In other words, restore to us the awareness of God that humanity once possessed. This suggests much which I cannot amplify at this stage, as it would be anticipating developments which must be left to the Candidate's later on.

Moreover, just as this Degree illustrates a period of change, not only in the history of the period on which the ritual is based; but from a Masonic point of view as presenting a new line of thought and conception of the future, so might it serve to remind us that often in life we arrive at a point where we are compelled to choose a definite course - the result of which may abide with us during the rest of our lives - a momentous decision must be made, affecting not only our own future, but perhaps that of many other; and how many of us are capable of choosing wisely and carefully, and unprejudiced by self-interest and other influences, and having a proper regard for the result of our own decisions on the lives of others. And so the Degree suggests that we should neglect no opportunity of fitting ourselves to make such decisions, so that we may be capable of exercising intelligent judgment, with due regard to the factors involved.

Let me remind you of the injunction in the final charge, which unfortunately is so seldom heeded - " To acquire such a degree of knowledge and information as will enable you to discharge with propriety the various duties incumbent upon you and so preserve unsullied the title we now confer of Excellent Master."

Very often however, it so occurs that momentous decisions are made without the slightest realisation of their far-reaching consequences or importance and in the Excellent Degree we have an illustration of one of the greatest of these in the decree of Cyrus. "If" it had not rained on the eve of Waterloo and thus prevented Napoleon from getting his artillery into action for hours after the battle started, how different may have been the history of Europe!. "If" Cyrus had not made his great decree and liberated the Jews, how different may have been the history of the world. For the foundation of all that represents modern civilisation, and what we are today, is the direct result of his decision, not only to liberate them, but to charge the Jews to rebuild the house of God at Jerusalem.

If the Jews, with their traditions and strong religious principles, strengthened and regenerated by the lease of life granted them under this dispensation, had not been a ruling force in Palestine at the advent of Jesus, the doctrines of the new and better covenant may have fallen on barren ground, apart from the fact that the event which introduced Christianity to the world may not have come into being at all.

The grand ideal in Masonry, to which all the rest are subsidiary and contributory, is that which represents the soul of man as a holy temple, a dwelling place for the Most High. McBride, in his "Speculative Freemasonry," extends the idea of speculative building from the Individual to society, thus: "The mission of Masonry being the building of the ideal temple, he is a true Mason who works true to the plan of that temple, He has to build himself, and thereby contribute to the building of humanity as a dwelling place for the Divine Presence." The book says, "Know ye not that ye are the Temple of God, and the spirit of God dwelleth within thee."

From the historical point of view, the events of the period depicted in the Excellent Degree clothe it with an importance which should not be underestimated. It is through the portals of this Degree, therefore, that we

symbolically enter on the path of our spiritual regeneration. It must always be remembered that all references to temples and stones throughout the ritual refer to the individual, not material temples etc; and keeping this constantly in mind, we can easily comprehend the unique symbolism employed, not only to impress us with the important moral and spiritual values they represent, but to enable us to discern the real aim and object of Ancient Freemasonry, of which the Royal Arch is part and parcel, and not a separate institution as is sometimes supposed.

To comprehend more fully the symbolism of Royal Arch Masonry, one must of course acquire some knowledge of that of Craft Masonry first. For obvious reasons I cannot traverse that vast field tonight, and will therefore confine myself strictly to the Excellent Degree.

The Tabernacle scene forms an important part of the ceremony. There is no historical evidence of the erection of a tabernacle, and like many other stories in Freemasonry, it is merely a myth introduced for symbolical purposes. It is not unlikely that some sort of shelter was erected near the Temple ruins to form a meeting place for worship and consultation; and the Altar of Sacrifice, inseparable from all Jewish enterprises, would be erected in the open court, as was usual in any case. In the real Tabernacle the curtains were around the wall, and did not divide it into compartments such as are used in this Degree. And the Holy of Holies was in the West, not the East, as depicted in a Masonic Temple.

As the curtains or veils have been so placed in our Tabernacle in the Chapter room, the symbolism is obviously contained within them and should be considered in two aspects. First, in reference to the symbolism of the veils as a whole, and next to each veil separately.

As a whole, the four veils, constituting four divisions of the Tabernacle, present obstacles to the neophyte in his advance to the most holy place, where the Grand Council sits. He is seeking advancement to that sacred spot that he may receive there his spiritual illumination, and be invested with a knowledge of the true Divine Name or Word. But Masonically this Divine Name or Word is itself only a symbol of Truth, the object, it has often been stated of all a Mason's search and labour. The passage through the veils is, therefore a symbol of trials and difficulties that are encountered, and must be overcome, in search of and the acquisition of Truth.

This is the general symbolism; but we are liable to lose sight of it in a great measure when we consider the interpretation of the symbolism of each veil independently of the others, for this principally symbolises the various virtues and attributes which should characterise a good man and Mason. Yet the two symbolisms are closely connected, because the virtues symbolised are those which must necessarily distinguish everyone engaged in the Divine search, and success is impossible without them.

The symbolism as used in the ritual refers to the colours of the veils, and to the miraculous signs of Moses which are described in "Exodus" as having been shown to him to prove his mission as the messenger of Jehovah. The Mosaic sign of the serpent (first veil) was the symbol amongst the ancients of resurrection to life, because the serpent by casting his skin, was supposed continually to renew his youth. It is a symbol here of the loss and recovery of the Word.

In the second veil the Mosaic sign refers to the restoration of the leprous hand to health, a repetition of the allusion to the loss and recovery of the Word.

In the third veil the Mosaic symbol of changing water to blood (or wine as it used to be) bears the same symbolic reference to a change for the better, from a lower to a higher state, from the elemental water in which there is no life to the wine (or blood) which is life itself, from darkness to light. The progress is still onward towards the recovery of that which was lost.

In the fourth veil white is the symbol of purity and appropriately reminds the neophyte, who is now drawing near the close of his search, that it is only by purity of life that he can expect to be found worthy of the reception of Divine Truth. The Great Teacher says "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."

The Mosaic signs now cease, and the aspirant, having endured all trials and overcome all obstacles is entitled to receive the reward which he has been seeking.

The children of Israel were carried away into captivity, where they served the King of Babylon, who symbolises the evils lusts of the flesh, for 70 years. It was actually about 52 years, but note the symbolic

three score years and ten – or a lifetime which is needed to subjugate the rebellious principles and evils which pervade human nature. Then there always arises a Messiah, a Cyrus if you please as a Hebrew; or a Jesus if you please as a Christian – a time when the edict goes forth that you are free, and a Zerubbabel comes forth to lead back again, to build our Second Temple by reformation.

Therefore, even bearing in mind our belief in the Fatherhood of God and the immortality of the soul, a belief to which all Freemasons must subscribe, let us strive to the limits of our finite powers to fit ourselves for the sublime state which this belief suggests. But no wishful thinking or pious professions will qualify us so a genuine effort to improve ones own nature by acquiring and developing the attributes of character which may lead to this end. Actually the end is purely speculative and of minor importance. The main thing is to give expression to these desirable attributes in practical terms of being and doing, something for somebody. The possession of a few estimable virtues and the passive influence of a blameless life, however creditable they may be, merely connote a negative or static condition, until translated into terms of service; that is what Freemasonry claims from its adherents. For of what use or value is admirable equipment or fine tools if not put to practical or constructive use?

Thus the Excellent Master's Degree depicts that turning point in history where began the system of religion and culture and intellectual progress which represents modern civilisation. Zeal, devotion to duty, loyalty, self-sacrifice and patience, are symbolised in the allegory of this Degree. Read the story carefully in the ritual, together with the full Scriptural references, assisted by a modern commentary translate it into realistic terms, and you will enjoy a greater and finer conception of the Degree than you have hitherto.