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THE ROYAL ARCH CHAPTER

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Master Masons arrive at a point when they say 'Why Royal Arch'. What is it what has it to do with the Craft? The short answer is an understatement, that it is the completion of the Third Degree.

Royal Arch provides genuine secrets following the substituted one and as such is an integral part of Freemasonry.

Together the Craft and Royal Arch span the whole period of the Old Testament and deal with the First and Second Temple in their entirety till 70 A.D. When the Roman Emperor Titus destroyed them all.

Biblical history tells us that a rebellion split the Twelve Tribes of Israel into two Kingdoms. In the North ten tribes formed the Kingdom but with the invasion of Sargon, King of Assyria they disappeared. The other two formed the Kingdom of Judah in the South, who in spite of domination of first Egypt and later Babylon, retained their identity.

Following a default in tribute payments Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple. King Jehoiachim and prominent people of Judah were taken to Babylon in exile. There the Hebrew survived as a religious community till Babylon fell to the Persians. Cyrus, their conqueror, encouraged the Hebrew Exiles to return to Jerusalem and rebuild both the city and the Temple.

Royal Arch deals with the return of the Exiles in clearing the ground for the foundation of the Second Temple. A Temple which according to Haggai we learn that the Second Temple embraced the spiritual development of Israel.

The ceremonies we use in the Royal Arch today are the result of evolution and changes since the 18th century. The true origins of Royal Arch are not known. The earliest reference we have is that Royal Arch was in common use in 1744, but even by that date it was already well established.

In consequence of so called 'innovations' a number of Irish Masons in London formed a Grand Lodge in 1751 calling themselves the Antients as opposed to the 1717 Grand Lodge whom they referred to as Moderns. These two groups worked in bitter hostility till a union was effected in 1813.

Of the two bodies the Antients were the most successful and progressive. Part of their success was that they had an additional degree to offer - Royal Arch which some Masonic scholars say originated in Ireland.

In the early days of Royal Arch, only a Master of a Lodge could be exalted with the result a situation arose where a Brother could remain in the Chair for years and so excluded others from becoming Master. To avoid this a modified Installation was produced to create Masters who had 'passed the Chair' without having ruled a Lodge. Hence Royal Arch flourished.

The Moderns did not officially recognise Royal Arch though many of their members took the Degree. So many did so that a Grand Chapter was created as a separate administration in England, independent of the Craft Grand Lodge.

With the 1813 Union (which was really a compromise with the Antients winning the day) it meant that Royal Arch was a matter which also had to be a compromise.

Under the Moderns Royal Arch was governed by an independent Grand Chapter, and only worked in Royal Arch Chapters. Under the Antients it was governed by a Grand Chapter which was really Grand Lodge and the Degree worked in Craft Lodges.

One of the Articles of Union stated that pure Antient Freemasonry consisted of three degrees and no more ie Entered Apprentice, Fellow Craft and Master Mason, including the Holy Royal Arch.

This led to a Union of Modern and Antient Chapters in 1817 which insisted that every Chapter must be attached to a Craft Lodge whose number the Chapter took. Hence today's Royal Arch under English Constitution only work Royal Arch and not the Mark or Excellent Degrees.

When the Grand Lodge of New Zealand was formed in 1890, the English Constitution Chapters were placed in an awkward position. The Lodges they were attached to no longer belonged to the English Constitution and were in danger of losing their Charters.

So on the 1st January 1892 the Grand Chapter of New Zealand was formed and modelled on the Grand Chapter of Scotland adopting the Degrees, rituals and regulations we use today.

The first impression of Royal Arch is that the atmosphere and environment is different from the Craft Lodge. Blue is replaced by Crimson. The pattern of three is repeated, but arranged differently. The three Grand Masters of Craft Lodges have been further developed. Instead of a Master and two Wardens, we have three Principals representing the Priest, Prophet and King equated with Hiram Abiff, Hiram of Tyre and Solomon, as well as with historical personages of the Old Testament Books of Ezra and Nehemiah, Haggai and Zerubbabel.

Jeshua is the High Priest to purify, cleanse and heal. His colour, light blue, the same as the Craft and therefore a link with Craft Lodges. His emblem, the Mitre of Aaron.

Haggai is the Prophet, the mouthpiece of God. The intermediary between God and Man. His colour purple - the blend of crimson and blue, therefore the transition from Craft to Royal Arch.

Zerubbabel, is King, ranking with the highest. His colour is crimson, the Royal Colour. Nobody becomes Zerubbabel who has not been Haggai and Jeshua. Nor does Zerubbabel act alone. All is done with support of Priest and Prophet, which is amply illustrated in the opening and closing of the Chapter.

The Candidate is prepared quite differently from that in the Craft Degrees, coming in as a Master Mason indicating he has absorbed the lessons of discipline. He now takes part in a drama of which he initially is unaware. He knows that immediately before the completion of the Temple, the Word was lost. He knows that the Temple was destroyed. Yet how can it be rebuilt without the 'Word'. Here the candidate represents the man sent at the critical moment – he as one of the three sojourners from Babylon led to the discovery of the Word.

The Degree opens in the Chapter Room where the Candidate is obligated. He then enters the building in Jerusalem where the Sanhedrin is sitting with the entrance protected by the veils, each with its Captain or Guard. He passes the veils by means of the tests received at Babylon and then for the first time enters the White Veil to find the Sanhedrin in session. There he is examined and accepted. He is then sent off not as a skilled Master Mason, but made to undertake work of hard drudgery to begin clearing away the ruins of the Old Temple. The Discovery that is made is such its impact is beyond the Candidate and his fellow Sojourners, so they return to the Sanhedrin to report and receive instruction. With Scribe Ezra they investigate further and return to take their report.

The key to the Degree is the Discovery in the Vault, the Sacred Name J H V H. Up to this point the Candidate has had only moral lessons then he is suddenly led to find the true spiritual meaning. His search has ended and Freemasonry has bared its final secret, the search for God himself. The moral laws he has been taught lead him to spiritual truths which are the ultimate teaching of the Craft.

The Candidate is clothed with a sash and apron and given a wand. He no longer has the implements of excavation. The Word by which the Temple was built - the Ineffable Name.