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THE ROYAL ARCH DEGREE

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Rule 71 of the Book of Constitution of the Grand Lodge of New Zealand states that there are six degrees in pure and ancient Freemasonry—Entered Apprentice, Fellow Craft, Master Mason, Mark Master Mason, Excellent Master and the Royal Arch. That is to say, in Masonic terms, Grand Lodge recognises the Order of the Royal Arch and its place in the wider ambit of Freemasonry. That rule suggests to a Master Mason that there is still much for him to learn; that Freemasonry does not stop when he has been Raised. Why then do less than 20% of the Craft Masons in New Zealand join the Order?

It is a conundrum that many fine Masonic minds have pondered without reaching conclusion. In August of 1962, VW Bro J P Glenie PGLec, who was later installed as GZ in 1975, presented a lecture on the Royal Arch to The Research Lodge of the Taranaki Province No 323^[1]. The first comment recorded in the reprint of that lecture was by RW Bro V F Howell, ProvGM who said

Some of you may think it is unusual to talk about the Royal Arch in a Craft Lodge but as [VW Bro Glenie] has explained it is part of the Craft degrees and is endorsed by Grand Lodge. As you know there is no prohibition against soliciting candidates for Royal Arch but I would advise you brethren, that if you are going to solicit, you select those whom you think will be genuinely interested, because as in the Blue, in the Royal Arch we have those who come in and fade away again. Why that is I don't know; it is rather hard to understand.

The most important point, perhaps, is that the Royal Arch, indeed Freemasonry, is not for everyone. Not everyone can adopt the firm moral imperative which is embodied in the philosophy of Freemasonry. And not everyone is interested in, or even capable of grasping, the understanding which the Royal Arch brings to bear on Masonic philosophy. Not everyone has the wherewithal—intellectual, physical, or interest—to want to join. If we were unkind we might castigate the 80% of Craft Masons who don't join the Order for their disinclination to learn more about the philosophy of the Order they profess to love. But we are not unkind. Rather, if we think about it, we use the knowledge and understanding we have gained to try to extend their experience with what we have learned. We can always hope that one day they will appreciate our efforts and, perhaps, feel inclined to change their stance.

Whatever their situation, they must realise that not all the questions have been answered for them. That the symbols and allegories of Craft Masonry leave certain questions begging for answers. Perhaps they have been unable to formulate or vocalise them. Perhaps they have been discouraged from asking them! For example W Bro R Sturmey in commenting on Glenie's paper said

When some M.Ms. are questioned by younger masons on matters such as the R.A. and so forth, in fact on any masonic point, this is what sometimes happens. If the particular M.M. does not know the answer he simply shrugs him off as though it were something he shouldn't ask and puts a mysterious veil around the whole question. This confuses the masonic student who wishes to acquire more information and if he is not of a persevering, enquiring mind, he is liable to be side-stepped by that aura of, "that's tabu, that doesn't concern you," "there's plenty of time for you to learn that," and all that sort of response.

Those that have heard me discuss some aspects of this dilemma, or have read what I have been writing in recent times, will know that I believe that the philosophy of Freemasonry is firmly established in the First Degree and that what we encounter from then on is intended to give us a better knowledge and understanding of it. I also contend that, given that much written about Masonic history and philosophy has to be treated with a degree of circumspection, if we wish to know more about the insights another Order may be able to give us, it is probably best that we join that Order and learn from its rituals. For example if we wished to take our understanding of Faith, Hope and Charity much further we should contemplate joining the Rose Croix. If we wish to pursue the concept of Brotherhood and Friendship we should consider the Secret Monitor.

Our question then is why should we join the Royal Arch?

In talking to non-Royal Arch Masons, and in other writings, I have suggested that the concerned and intelligent Master Mason will, or at least should, ask a number of questions regarding the physical structure of a Lodge, the relationship of the roles in it, and the explanations, rituals, and symbols he has been presented with. Not the least of this is the conundrum associated with the character of Hiram Abiff and the circumstances of his assassination and the results of his sudden and untimely death. Possibly the most important question is why we have to use substituted secrets “until time or circumstances shall restore the genuine ones”? The Craft does not answer this question. The Royal Arch does.

I have been questioned on what I mean by “lost secrets” and it has been suggested to me that the Royal Arch does itself disavour by referring to them as such. My response is to refer to the catechism of the opening a Lodge in the Third Degree:

Q. Whence come you?

A. From the East.

Q. Whither are you directing your course?

A. To the West.

Q. What inducement have you to leave the East and go to the West?

A. To seek for that which was lost, which by your instructions and our own industry, we hope to find.

Q. What is that which was lost?

A. The genuine secrets of a Master Mason.

Q. How came they lost?

A. By the untimely death of our Master, Hiram Abiff.

And from the closing:

Q. ... whence come you?

A. From the West, whither we have been in search of the genuine secrets of a Master Mason.

Q. Have you been successful?

A. We have not but we bring with us certain substituted secrets which we are anxious to impart for your approbation.

Later, having received the secrets the Master says:

Brethren, the substituted secrets of a Master Mason thus regularly communicated to me, I, as the Master of this Lodge, and thereby the humble representative of King Solomon, do sanction and confirm with my approbation, and declare that they shall designate you and all Master Masons throughout the world, until time or circumstance shall restore the genuine ones.

The Master Mason has been informed in the Third Degree ceremony that the secrets were known to three men. When he is attacked by the ruffians at the gates who demand the secrets of a Master Mason, Hiram Abiff is said to have responded that “... those secrets are known to but three in the world, and without the consent and co-operation of the other two he neither could nor would divulge them; but intimated he had no doubt that patience and industry would in due time entitle the worthy Mason to a participation in them ...” In the play of the Alternative Third Degree, in the ritual of the New Zealand Constitution, this is brought home with the words: “... but if you will wait until the first full moon after the completion of the Temple, when Solomon, King of Israel, Hiram, King of Tyre, and myself are present, these secrets will be given to you if you are found worthy.” So, clearly, Solomon, Hiram, and Hiram Abiff knew the secrets. How then did the death of Hiram Abiff cause them to be lost? The Royal Arch Degree answers that question, but not perhaps in the way to be expected.

Roy A Wells, in his inaugural address to the London First Principals’ Chapter No 2712 in September 1973 gives us significant insight into what exactly it was that was lost^[2].

When the Craft adopted the Hiram legend it sowed the seed for an expansion of the ritual which would provide for the recovery of the Word which, incidentally, was never lost. In the Craft it is asserted that the pronunciation of the Ineffable Name of the Almighty was known to the three Grand Masters and this was spoken by them, in a particular manner, when they met together for this purpose.

He continued:

We have no record that the WORD was ever used in Craft ritual but it does appear on the “Master’s Floor Plan” printed in various Exposures dated c.: 1745. The Word is there prominently displayed on the coffin and in the Index is described as the “Former Word of a Master”. In the “Master’s Catechism” of that same period (Le Sceau Rompu—1745) we find the following:

Q. What come you here to do?

A. To seek for that which was lost.

Q. What is that which was lost?

A. The Master’s Word.

Q. How was it lost?

A. By three great knocks, or the death of Adoniram.

Q. How was our very worthy Master Adoniram assassinated?

A. By three ruffians, who conspired to extort the word from him or take his life.

This catechism goes on until the final question which is:—

Q. What did he order to be placed on his tomb?

A. A gold Medal, in triangular form, on which was engraved the word JEOVA (sic) which is the name of God in Hebrew.

Here is something that every Royal Arch Mason will instantly recognise—not a “secret” but a word. The Royal Arch Degree instructs us in a peculiar, tripartite method of pronouncing it. Take one of the three away and the ability to pronounce it is lost. By implication, the word, the secret, is “lost”.

You might like to note that this early Craft ritual does not refer to Hiram Abiff, but to Adoniram, so it must predate the introduction of the Hiram legend.

This is further amplified in the Royal Master Degree, one of the degrees of Cryptic Masonry where Adoniram asks “Grand Master Hiram” when he might receive the Master’s Word. Hiram replies “My worthy friend Adoniram, I do not know that you will ever receive it, for a solemn obligation has been entered into by Solomon King of Israel, Hiram King of Tyre and myself, that the Word can be given only when the Temple is completed, and then only in the presence of all three.”

This appears to be a mixture of the pre- and post-Hiram legends and reinforces the opinion expressed by Laurence Gardner^[3] that:

“... a rather more than adequate 3rd degree already existed. It was much older, and had evolved quite separately from Craft Freemasonry, with records of a Scottish working as far back as 1590 in Stirling. Laurence Dermott, Grand Secretary of the Antients, explained to the Moderns that he knew of this degree, which existed quite independently of the Craft, and that he firmly believed it to be the ‘the root, heart, and marrow of Freemasonry’, but he was ignored.”

In fact, Dermott had written in his Ahiman Rezon^[4]:

“Antient Masonry consists of four degrees—the first of which are, that of Apprentice, the Fellow-Craft, and the sublime degree of Master; and a Brother, being well versed in these degrees, and otherwise qualified, as hereafter will be expressed is eligible to be admitted to the Fourth Degree, the Holy Royal Arch. This degree is certainly more august, sublime and important than those which precede it and is the summit and perfection of Ancient Masonry. It inspires in our minds a more firm belief of the existence of a Supreme Deity without beginning of days, or end of years, and justly reminds us of the respect and veneration due to that Holy Name.”

It is not easy to ascertain how the form of our various allegories, rites and plays came about. Indeed as RE Comp Jim Ingley PGSupt says^[5], we really need to be able to interview some of those involved in the developments of 250—300 years ago. We know that Desaguliers, Grand Master of the Moderns in 1719 either wrote, or caused to be written the allegory which introduced the character of Hiram Abiff. I am not so sure about who drafted the story of the assault on him and his display of integrity, which is fundamental to Masonic philosophy, into a play. It is even more difficult to ascertain who drafted the form of the ceremony of Exaltation. That there was a need was undoubted and many learned scholars have expressed it in a variety of ways. For example Roy Wells wrote^[6]:

If it were possible to summarize the teachings of the three Degrees in a few words, in order to appreciate the parts played by each in relationship to the Royal Arch, it might well be said:-

(a) The First Degree emphasizes the Supreme Being—the Father of all—who permits entrance to mortal existence. In it we learn the duty we owe to our neighbour in his time of need.

(b) The Second Degree stresses the duty we owe to ourselves to develop fully our talent and skill in the Arts and Sciences and then play a useful part in life.

(c) The Third Degree provides an opportunity to contemplate upon the closing hour of existence however untimely that may seem to be for some of our Brethren and colleagues.

Thus we have an obvious sequence of Birth, Maturity, and Death, but to what purpose? If the 'Word' has been lost for a succeeding generation how then are they to appreciate that the Soul will return to the Father who gave it life?

(d) The Royal Arch embraces the whole programme and illustrates in a very colourful setting that divine and human affairs are indeed interwoven throughout all these stages. It helps us to a wider knowledge and better understanding of the nature of the Almighty.

The Royal Arch plays its part by completing the theme of 'loss and recovery' and, in this sense, is a conclusion to the Third Degree. That it has become severed from the Craft and then developed and enlarged to its present form is probably to the advantage of its members. The separation tends to ensure that the 'light' which it contains is then shed only upon those who come to it 'properly prepared', that is, with an understanding that among the many favours we receive in Freemasonry there is also the opportunity to increase our own spiritual philosophy. Humility and contrition are demonstrated as sure indications of merit.

Glenie expressed it as^[7]:

The First, traditionally, represents our Masonic birth. It shows the Candidate coming into a Lodge for the first time, a rough ashlar direct from the quarries of life ... a stone sound at core which can therefore be chipped and dressed into the final polished form of the perfect ashlar.

The task of the First Degree, then, is to show, the Candidate the tools whereby he can gradually bring about that transition from rough to perfect, a task which will take him a full lifetime of endeavour and will not be completed this side of the grave. The tools he is given are the rules of moral conduct and good living which come to us in the W.T.'s, the address in the N.E. Corner, and above all in the Charge after Initiation.

So, having been given the tools, he passes to the Second Degree and there learns of his responsibility to use his every endeavour and smallest talent to pursue the lessons of the First Degree. As the First was his Masonic birth, so the Second is his Masonic life and in the central symbolism of the W.T.'s, he finds the lessons of perseverance and struggle which alone can carry him safely through the pitfalls of life. The Parable of the Talents, and his duty to use to the full the gifts wherewith he has been blessed, are ever before him in the teachings of the Second Degree.

He comes then to the Third, the most difficult of the three degrees to understand. I believe it is often misunderstood as being a death and resurrection Degree, teaching us, in the words of the Ritual, "how to die". I suggest to you that it is nothing of the sort but that, like all Masonic teaching its meaning is symbolic.

It does not teach the reality of actual death and what comes after but rather a figurative death, followed by that reunion with our brethren of which the Ritual speaks. This figurative death is no more than the death of our former selves and a rebirth into that better and finer state which a proper attention to the lessons of the first two degrees has taught. Our rough ashlar is becoming smooth as, phoenix-like, we rise from the ashes of our former selves into that state of refinement and nearer perfection which is the aim of Craft Masonry.

Glenie then asks another question:

Think now for a moment of your ritual. The brethren go forth in search of the genuine secrets of a Master Mason. In other words they seek an answer to the riddle and mystery of life. Are they successful

in finding it? We all know they are not. Far from anything so fundamental, they achieve only a set of moral rules, represented in concise form by the F.P.O.F.

This is the point at which the inadequacy, or perhaps more properly the incompleteness of the Craft degrees becomes apparent. Surely the search of Masonry is for something far deeper and more enduring than that.

He pondered on whether Masonic philosophy is unique:

After all Confucius, and a long line of moral philosophers since his day, have given us sound moral precepts and have done it satisfactorily with none of the secret and symbolic methods of teaching that Masonry adopts. If that were all we sought, our organisation would fall far short of what is sensible and reasonable.

But he concluded that the greater truth comes, not in the Craft Degrees but:

... in the final and Supreme Degree, that of the Holy Royal Arch. Holy it is and rightly called and the lessons it teaches will give us no substituted secrets. For when the supreme moment of the Royal Arch Degree is reached, Freemasonry has fully and completely justified its existence. The genuine secrets of the whole Craft are at last laid bare and we see before our eyes its final lessons and its ultimate teachings. In the Craft degrees we learn of our brotherly duty to our neighbour; in the Royal Arch we are surely instructed in our final duty towards our God. How can we, as true Freemasons, satisfy ourselves with less than that?

These two descriptions suggest a reason for extending our knowledge and understanding beyond the Third Degree. And, of course, that in order to drive home the message of integrity and the desirability of **earning** the right to certain “secrets”, the drafters of the Third Degree arrived at a situation where the “word” was suddenly jeopardised. Some way of recovering “that which was lost” became desirable. I have often wondered whether or not they intended that. It is not clear, and there is little available to suggest the motivations which drove them. It reinforces my view that what happened is relatively easy to ascertain; finding out why it happened is a much more difficult task!

Someone drafted, or caused to be drafted, a ceremony in which the mainstream Masonic path to enlightenment is completed. To, as Glenie puts it, lay bare the genuine secrets so that “we see before our eyes its final lessons and ultimate teachings.” How did he, or they, arrive at a play in which the “lost secrets” would be found in a secret vault below King Solomon’s Sanctum Sanctorum? Why would there be an altar with a circle and triangle of gold on top of it? Why would there be characters inscribed on them? Why would there be a scroll which turned out to have great significance? And a jewel?

Indeed, why would it involve a vault?

I can find no mention of a vault in the Old Testament, even in the usual 15 books of the Apocrypha. However, Mackey in his History of Freemasonry refers to the Apocryphal Book of Enoch (the 7th Patriarch—father of Methuselah and great grandfather of Noah), a book which is not usually published in a Bible that includes books of the Apocrypha. He wrote^[8]:

Enoch, being inspired by the Most High, and in obedience to a vision, constructed underground, in the bosom of Mount Moriah, an edifice consisting of nine brick vaults situated perpendicularly beneath each other and communicating by apertures left in the arch of each vault.

He then caused a triangular plate of gold to be made, each side of which was a cubit long; he enriched it with the most precious stones and engraved upon it the ineffable name of God. He then encrusted the plate upon a stone of agate of the same form, which he placed upon a cubical stone of marble, and deposited the whole within the ninth or innermost vault.

When this subterranean building was completed, Enoch made a slab or door of stone, and, attaching to it a ring of iron, by which it might, if necessary, be raised, he placed it over the aperture of the uppermost arch, and so covered it over with soil that the opening could not easily be discovered. Enoch himself was not permitted to enter it more than once a year, and on his death or translation all knowledge of this building and of the sacred treasure which it contained was lost until in succeeding

ages it was accidentally discovered while Solomon was engaged in building, a temple above the spot, on the same mountain.

The Legend proceeds to inform us that after Enoch had finished the construction of the nine vaults, fearing that the principles of the arts and sciences which he had assiduously cultivated would be lost in that universal deluge of which he had received a prophetic vision, he erected above-ground two pillars, one of marble, to withstand the destructive influences of foe, and one of brass, to resist the action of water in the pillar of brass he engraved the history of the creation, the principles of the arts and sciences, and the doctrines of Speculative Masonry as they were then practiced; and on the pillar of marble he inscribed in hieroglyphic characters the information that near the spot where they stood a precious treasure was deposited in a subterranean vault.

Here we have an indication of why a vault would be significant, and why it might prove useful in a story intended to extend our knowledge and understanding. It is logical, of course, that a building with the import of a Temple would have a secret vault—some place where the most precious objects could be secreted in times of danger. Knight and Lomas^[9], in “The Hiram Key”, expressed the belief that the Templars found some copper scrolls which had been produced by the Qumran Community. Patrick Byrne^[10], in “The Long Lost Secrets of Freemasonry”, maintains that they found the Ark of the Covenant. All of which, conjecture or otherwise, tends to support the theory of a vault. However, it doesn’t explain a story about three persons finding it, gaining entry, and then discovering the “lost” objects.

Philostorgius, however, did have such a story. In his Ecclesiastical History he writes of “Julian” rebuilding Jerusalem^[11]:

When Julian bade the city of Jerusalem to be rebuilt in order to refute openly the predictions of our Lord concerning it, he brought about exactly the opposite of what he intended. For his work was checked by many other prodigies from heaven; and especially, during the preparation of the foundations, one of the stones which was placed at the lowest part of the base, suddenly started from its place and opened the door of a certain cave hollowed out in the rock. Owing to its depth, it was difficult to see what was within this cave; so persons were appointed to investigate the matter, who, being anxious to find out the truth, let down one of their workmen by means of a rope. On being lowered down he found stagnant water reaching up to his knees; and, having gone round the place and felt the walls on every side, he found the cave to be a perfect square. Then, in his return, as he stood near about the middle, he struck his foot against a column which stood rising slightly above the water. As soon as he touched this pillar, he found lying upon it a book wrapped up in a very fine and thin linen cloth; and as soon as he had lifted it up just as he had found it, he gave a signal to his companions to draw him up again. As soon as he regained the light, he showed them the book, which struck them all with astonishment, especially because it appeared so new and fresh, considering the place where it had been found. This book, which appeared such a mighty prodigy in the eyes of both heathens and Jews, as soon as it was opened showed the following words in large letters: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." In fact, the volume contained that entire Gospel which had been declared by the divine tongue of the (beloved) disciple and the Virgin.

So here we have the allegory as we apply it to the three Sojourners.

You might like to note, however, a substantial difference from the allegory in our ritual—the opening line that Scribe Ezra reads to Zerubbabel when he is handed the scroll by the sojourner. We use the words from the first three verses of Genesis.

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.

The words cited by Philostorgius are, however, the first verse of the Gospel of St John.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

You might recall that I quoted Wells as referring to the “word” in the early Craft ritual. Here we now have proof of the earlier Christian nature of the ritual prior to 1717.

So we now know the origin of the story we use, and why the Royal Arch Degree was developed—to complete the story of the Craft Degrees. Does it do only that? That is, does it give us the “genuine secrets”? Clearly Glenie and Wells thought so. Indeed, Glenie is quoted by Dalzell as writing^[12]:

“So our search is ended; we have found what all men seek. We know at last that Freemasonry leads to the Deity Himself: that first declaration we make in the first degree is now at last explained.”

And Christensen wrote^[13]:

What was lost in the Third Degree and found in the ceremony of the Royal Arch is depicted by the word found on the Altar. But it is a symbol only; we are not searching for any particular word, or, in fact, a word at all. The expression, “the word”, had a significance for the Jews and other ancient races which is a little difficult for us to comprehend. In their minds it signified all truth, particularly Divine Truth, which ... is our symbolic expression for God. To us the most familiar and striking passage referring to this is that of St. John: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” Before Freemasonry was de-Christianised, this was the passage actually used, where we now employ the one: “In the beginning God created,” etc. What happens in the ceremony merely symbolises the discovery of “the Word,” or God, within oneself.

Have we, then, reached the end of our journey?

Only you can answer that for yourselves.

I cannot answer it for you. But I can say for myself that the journey is far from over.

[1] “The Meaning and Origin of The Royal Arch”, VW Bro JP Glenie PGLec, The Research Lodge of the Taranaki Province No 323, 21 August 1962.

[2] “The Royal Arch as the Perfection of the Masters Degree”, An Inaugural Address given to the London First Principals’ Chapter No 2712, 28 September 1973, re-printed in the Transactions of the Research Chapter of New Zealand No 93, Vol IV No 9, June 1977, p132.

[3] Laurence Gardner “The Shadow of Solomon” Harper Element 2005 ISBN 13: 978 0 00 720761 9, ISBN 10: 0 00 720761 1, p 193.

[4] “Ahiman Rezon”, Laurence Dermott, 1756

[5] Private Communication, RE Comp JGW Ingley PGSupt, Hauraki District, SGRACNZ.

[6] “Why The Royal Arch”, Roy A. Wells PAGDC (EC), Transactions of the Research Chapter of New Zealand No 93, Vol 4, No 8, March 1977, P117.

[7] “The Meaning and Origin of The Royal Arch”, VW Bro JP Glenie PGLec, The Research Lodge of the Taranaki Province No 323, 21 August 1962.

[8] “The History of Freemasonry” Albert Gallatin Mackey, Part 1, Chapter 41, 1898

[9] “The Hiram Key”, Christopher Knight and Robert Lomas, Arrow Books, 1997, ISBN-10: 0099699419, ISBN-13: 978-0099699415

[10] “The Long Lost Secrets of Freemasonry (and Rennes le Chateau)”, Patrick Byrne MA, PPGReg, PPAGSoj, published privately 1997.

[11] Epitome Of The Ecclesiastical History Of Philostorgius, Compiled By Photius, Patriarch Of Constantinople. Translated By Edward Walford, M. A. Late Scholar Of Balliol College, Oxford. London: Henry G. Bohn, York Street, Covent Garden. MDCCCLV. (See <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/pearse/morefathers/files/philostorgius.htm>), Chapter 41.

[12] “The Craft and Royal Arch Masonry”, K W Dalzell PAGDC, Lecture presented to Willam Fergusson Massey Royal Arch Chapter No 61, 6 April 2009.

[13] “THE ROYAL ARCH DEGREE: THE SUMMIT AND PERFECTION OF FREEMASONRY”, By M.E. COMP. A. B Christensen, P.G.Z. Transactions of the Auckland Chapter of Research No 93 Vol II No 4, 10 June 1965