

THE HOLY ROYAL ARCH KEYSTONE OF THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY WITHIN

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There is an image in Masonry that is as powerful in its symbolic meaning as any encountered in the whole of the Masonic journey. It is the image of two pillars supporting an arch centered by a keystone, behind which is situated a sacred vault. Enclosed within this vault is the Ark of the Covenant. And within this set of symbols is found the great secret of the Royal Arch, and the central thought of Masonry.

We may never know from whence the Royal Arch Degree came. To date, there has not been a single source of possible origin which has not, at some time, been disputed by one or more Masonic scholars. Some say it came out of the Guild system of the middle Ages; others believe it was practiced within the "Accepted Lodge" of the London Mason's Company during the 1600's. Yet others believe it had no point of origin until after Speculative Freemasonry was formally established in the 1717-23 English Grand Lodge era. And the Royal Arch Degree may not have been English in origin at all. There is a considerable favor given in Masonic literature that it was a degree of French origin, brought to England sometime after 1730. Indeed, there is no question that many side degrees and degree systems were developed in France shortly after the craft ritual migrated to the continent; not the least of which was the Ancient and Accepted Rite, upon which contemporary Scottish Rite ritual is based.

And then there is the question of the "incomplete" nature of the Master Mason degree, lending credence to an argument that it was never intended to be the last of the Craft degrees. Certainly, it seems unlikely that a Masonic degree which provides a legend in which something is lost (and another substituted in its place until it can later be found) would represent the pinnacle, or end, of a progressive system of degrees. It is easy to suggest that the Master's degree was either originally part of a larger system which had to include elements of the Royal Arch degree; or degree writers of the early speculative period simply saw an opportunity in the Hiram Legend to complete the symbolic structure of the craft system through a continuation of higher degrees.

Regardless from whence it came, we find elements of the Royal Arch being worked within craft lodges in England and France as early as 1733, and by 1740, the story of the rebuilding of the Temple of Zerabbabel had gained some prominence among lodges in their ritual workings.

The first printed reference to the term 'Royal Arch' appeared in Faulkner's Dublin Journal, January 10, 1743, reporting on a Masonic processional held on St. John's Day a month earlier, wherein "the Royal Arch carried by two Excellent Masons" appeared in a parade in front of the Master of the lodge. Then, in 1744, a medical doctor named D'Assigny published a book which made the first known reference to a Royal Arch Degree, by referring to a group of men who were "Masters of the Royal Arch." By 1745, it is known that a Royal Arch ceremony was being practiced in Ireland, England, France, and Scotland, with the first exalting in the American colonies reported as early as 1753.

When the Grand Lodge of the Ancients established its Constitution in 1751, it made the Royal

Arch an essential degree to the Craft system of degrees, thus launching what would eventually become the “ne plus ultra” of Capitular Masonry across the globe. In this degree, we find three candidates in waiting to be “exalted to the august degree of Royal Arch.” The ceremony of exaltation transfers them from the region of symbolic Masonry, wherein lessons in morals and ethics are taught by allegory; into the domain of religion, wherein the nature of God in man is revealed through the discovery of the WORD. Each candidate is bound seven times, representing the seventh degree in the progression of degrees thus experienced, and to remind them of the interrelationship between the numbers 4 and 3, to which they previously have been made aware in the many symbolic forms of the preceding degrees. They are also uniquely connected, one to the other, formatting yet another triad in the midst of the many associated with this degree – the three temples, three sojourners, three working tools, the three apartments, three arks, three veils and colors, the three courts, three lessons, etc. And thus, by being joined together, they symbolically ceased to be separate individuals - they now represent the “Complete Man,” comprised of Body, Soul, and Spirit. From this point forward, the three candidates are motivated by a single desire - to be “exalted” to the spiritual plane of being.

The first section of the degree has little significance other than to describe the moral causes which led to the destruction of Jerusalem and the first temple. It is intended only to bridge the gap between the Most Excellent Master and the Royal Arch Degree.

The second section of the degree describes the journey from Babylon to Jerusalem. In actuality, the proclamation of Cyrus to build the “House of the Lord” really commences what may be called the second section. The whole space of time occupied by the Babylonian Captivity, and the events connected with that portion of Jewish history, are not referred to in the ceremonies, but constitute a symbolic period of time in which something is replaced by another. It’s interesting that the Hebrew word for Babylon means “confusion”. It is a place of evil, materialism and chaos. Conversely, the Hebrew word for Jerusalem means “habitation of peace”. The last part of the word, “Shalom” also means “whole, or perfect - to complete” or the “completeness of being”. Thus, we find our candidates psychically journeying from a state of chaos to spiritual perfection. In our own journey of life, each of us must become an active participant in building the house of the Lord, or our own spiritual temple. Both the hazards and beauty of the Journey described in this section of the ritual represent the trials and victories inherent in this journey.

In the final section of the degree, the candidate is presented with a remarkable allegory, the same which can be found in the Master Mason Degree, and the same which exists in all of the ancient mysteries - the great lesson represented by the resurrection of the body and the immortality of the soul. Symbolically, all of these allegorical forms are commended in sorrow and terminated in joy.

In the Royal Arch Degree, there is a resurrection of that which had been buried – a discovery of that which had been lost - and an exchange of that, which, like the body, is temporary; for that which, like the soul, is permanent. The life which we pass on earth is but a substitute for the exalted one we spend in eternity. And it is in the grave, in the rubbish of the temple, in the depths of the earth, in the experience and trials of our own life, that the “corruptible puts on incorruption, the mortal puts on immortality!” The interval of time occupied by the captivity of the Jews at Babylon is now over, and the allegory of the Royal Arch is resumed with the restoration of the captives to their home. The sacred vessels and precious ornaments of the

first temple were still in existence - that which had been lost is discovered, and the TRUE WORD is revealed. The building of the sacred temple out of the ruins of the first represents the rebirth of the human race in a new dispensation to be later revealed - and our own rebirth into a higher consciousness with God.

Such is the task of the Royal Arch Masons – to build the spiritual temple of his second life upon the shattered ruins of the old. The foundation is still intact, as in Jerusalem. And if his foundation of faith is firm, he may look forward to the object of his search - the revelation of Truth in the recovery of the True Word. As Royal Arch Masons, we are to be constantly engaged in the noble labor of consciously rebuilding ourselves from the shattered temples of our own passions, intolerance and ignorance; discovering beneath the rubbish the lost treasure of Light and Truth. The Keystone signifies our rebirth. The foundation Stone of our new Temple is the Word of God, and the Sacred Book of Law. And our journey of faith lies in our hope that we may be admitted to the Sanctum Sanctorum of that House not made with Hands; where, in the presence of the Great Trinity, we may, by virtue of three times three, be invested with the immaculate Word of Truth – and dwell forever in the glory of a blissful reward. Such are some of the lessons of the Royal Arch Degree.