



Grand Royal Arch Chapter of the State of Illinois

Capitular Degrees of Freemasonry₁



Mark Master Mason (4°)



The degree of Mark Master is believed to be the oldest degree in Freemasonry and to predate all others by many years.

The legend of the degree is singularly instructive and is well founded on statements of Holy Writ, relating to the period in the building of King Solomon's Temple, (in Hebrew: בית המקדש, transliterated as *Beit HaMidkash*) atop Mount Moriah in the Holy City of Jerusalem. In the United States, the degree ritual takes place immediately following the death of Grand Master Hiram Abif, although in many countries, the ritual takes place immediately prior to Hiram's death – in keeping with the degree's lesson plan of completing the Fellowcraft degree [2°]), it teaches the valuable lessons, including: 1) how

to receive wages as a fellow of the craft; 2) education is the reward of labour; 3) a man is remembered by the mark he makes in his life; 4) labour is, itself noble; and 5) time served does not create superiority. Like the Fellowcraft degree, the Mark Master degree is less concerned with the past and future and more with the here and now of our present life. It places emphasis on not judging people or situations on outward appearances but to seek hidden truths. The ritual contains a dramatic message that fraud can never succeed. The story is inspired by the parable in Matthew 20:1-19 and Psalms 118:22.

The symbol of the degree is a keystone on which are engraved certain mystic letters, the collective meaning of which is explained in the ceremony. In the era of operative stonemasons, each fellow of the craft would place his unique mark on the stones he cut, in order to identify his work and receive the wages due him for his labours. Additionally, in the event of faulty work, enabled the foreman or overseer to identify the workman responsible. The Cathedrals, castles and other stone architecture of Britain and Europe, dating back to the early mediæval era (the so-called "Dark Ages"), still bear the marks of the men who built them. These same marks would be used as the masons' signatures on documents, as literacy was uncommon. Following the ceremony of this degree, each new Mark Master is obliged to choose a distinctive mark and to draw it in his chapter's register book of marks.

The Mark Master Mason degree is thought to have originated as a ceremony of registering a craftsman's mark in his lodge of operative stonemasons. It was later developed into a full fledged degree by the Masonic fraternity as we know it today. There is evidence that a form of Mark Degree was in existence in Scotland as early as 1599. According to the earliest known English records Mark Masonry was introduced in a speculative body at Portsmouth on 1 September 1769, when that ubiquitous brother of the Craft, Sir Thomas Dunkerley, conferred the Mark Degree on brethren of the Royal Arch Chapter of Friendship No. 257. Records do not show whence he received the degree, but all researchers into Freemasonry know of the man and his place in the history of Freemasonry. Mark Masonry is a continuation of the less the lessons the lessons taught in the Fellowcraft Degree (2°) in the symbolic lodge. It is highly regarded by students and ritualists as one of the most beautiful degrees in all of Freemasonry, teaching lessons that have proven of value in all walks of life. Many grand lodges outside of North America; most notably the United Grand Lodge of England; place so high an eminence on the Mark Master degree that they confine it to the jurisdiction of a separate grand body; in England, this is styled as the Grand Lodge of Mark Master Masons.

In North America, jurisdiction over the Mark Master's degree is vested in the various Royal Arch grand chapters. Thus the Grand Royal Arch Chapter of the State of Illinois simultaneously acts as a *de facto* grand lodge of Mark Masters, as do our counterpart grand chapters within their respective states, provinces, territories and the federal district. To add to the confusion that this may cause, the degree of Royal Ark Mariner, although under the jurisdiction of Mark Master grand lodges in many parts of the world, is not conferred by the North American grand chapters. Rather, it is delegated in the United States and Canada to the councils of Allied Masonic Degrees.

Although the ritual of the Mark Master degree addresses the candidate as a Fellowcraft Mason, and the curriculum builds upon the Fellowcraft degree (2°), only Master Masons (3°) are eligible to petition for the Mark Master degree. Entry into the Mark Degree is not automatic; every brother seeking to become a Mark Master must be proposed and seconded by two companions of the chapter he seeks to join. It is expected that the proposer and endorser of the candidate will vouch that he is of good moral standard and worthy of being received into the degree.

[Please click here to read essays on the Mark Master degree from the Grand Chapter of Alberta](#)

Past Master [Virtual] (5°)



The Past Master (Virtual) degree teaches the candidate the lessons of Psalm 25: that he must first learn to obey before he can rule, and to govern himself before he can govern others; and to govern in moderation and propriety. Facilitating this lesson is the parable contained in Matthew 20:1-19.

The degree came into being because, originally, the degree of Holy Royal Arch Mason was conferred by the symbolic ("blue") lodges only upon actual, installed past masters. As grand lodges determined from time to time that more men should receive the knowledge imparted in the Holy Royal Arch degree, the Grand Master would dispense a brother to "pass the chair," meaning that the brother would be summarily installed as Worshipful Master of his lodge, perform one or more ceremonial, *pro forma* acts (calling for the vote on a motion, recognising a brother, *inter alia*). The degree of Past Master (Virtual) was instituted to make it possible for all worthy brethren to receive the Holy Royal Arch degree and to standardise the process for its eligibility. The first record of the degree's conferral is found in 1768 in England.

The ceremonial degree ritual for the Past Master (Virtual) is short and bears some similarity to the installation ritual of a Worshipful Master of a lodge of Freemasons. The Grand Royal Arch Chapter of the State of Illinois recognises two ceremonial rituals for each degree. Most chapters use the 1972 "red book" ritual, in which the story flows directly from the conclusion of the Mark Master degree; the connection between the two has been described as though the brethren witnessing or receiving the degree could imagine the caption, "to be continued" appearing at the close of the Mark Master ritual. The 1914 "Blackhawk" ritual; still authorised in Illinois and used by some chapters; stands alone and, although making passing reference to King Solomon, is not set in-period.

Most Excellent Master (6°)



The Most Excellent Master degree is, by far, one of the most impressive rituals in all of Freemasonry. It is the only degree that brings forcibly to our attention the completion and dedication of King Solomon's Temple (in Hebrew: הַמִּקְדָּשׁ בֵּית, transliterated as *Beit HaMidkash*) atop Mount Moriah in the Holy City of Jerusalem – the very idea upon which all Masonic symbolism has been based. Drawing upon the history recorded in 2 Chronicles 6 and 7, and 1 Kings 7 and 8, the degree depicts celebration of the Temple, its final architectural step, and the installation of the sacred items within the Holy of Holies while mourning the death of Grand Master Hiram Abif. Thus, it completes the story begun in the ritual of the Master Mason's degree (3°) in a spectacular, participatory ritual.

In this degree, the brother is taught the lesson that he has a responsibility to exploit opportunities to share with less informed brethren his wisdom and Masonic light.

The degree is a product of American innovation. It was conferred in Royal Arch chapters as early as 1783 in Middletown, Connecticut, having been authored by Thomas Smith Webb and published in his *The Freemason's Monitor or Illustrations of Masonry*. Companion Webb, however, did not create the degree from whole cloth. Throughout the 1700s, many of the various competing jurisdictions conferring the Holy Royal Arch degree in the British Isles and their overseas territories each instituted a prerequisite degree. Such degrees were titled Excellent Mason, Excellent Master, Super Excellent Mason, Most Excellent Master, *inter alia*, and differed in their content. The degree of that era which shared its name with the current Most Excellent Master degree was a little known degree in degree in Scotland.

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Holy Royal Arch Mason (7°)



The supreme degree of the Holy Royal Arch, as the culmination of the capitular degrees, is the climax of Ancient Craft Freemasonry and Masonic symbolism. It is described as “the root and marrow of Freemasonry.”

The ritual presents the story of Jewish history beginning in some of its darkest hours, as recorded in 2 Chronicles 36. The City of Jerusalem and the Holy Temple built by Kings Solomon & Hiram, and Grand Master Hiram Abif were destroyed in 586 B.C.E. The people of Israel are being held captive as slaves in Babylon. Forty-eight years later, the events of the Book of Ezra present a brighter, if no less challenging, outlook for the Jewish people.

Here, the brother joins with Zerubbabel (in Hebrew: זְרֻבָבֶל), set free in 538 B.C.E. pursuant to the Edict of Restoration promulgated by King Cyrus II (a/k/a Cyrus the Great or Cyrus the Elder) (in Farsi: گورزب شوروک) to return home and engage in the noble and glorious work of rebuilding the Temple of G-d and the City of Jerusalem – a project which would later be stalled under Cyrus' son, King Cambyses (کامبوسپ), and completed in earnest under the auspices of King Darius (داریوش). It is during this rebuilding that they make a discovery, bringing to light the greatest treasure of a Freemason: the long lost Master's Word. The Holy Royal Arch is a natural progression to reveal the “genuine” secrets following the granting of certain substituted ones and, as such, it truly forms an integral part of Freemasonry.

During their conferral of the Holy Royal Arch degree, a chapter makes use of its veils, Hebrew tribal ensigns, and other accoutrements.

There is good reason to believe that the sublime degree of Master Mason, as we now know it, was never intended to be the culmination of the Craft degrees, given its incomplete nature. The ritual of Master Mason's degree centres around the quest for the Master's Word and concludes with a story of its loss and substitution pending its rediscovery – a rediscovery made in the Holy Royal Arch degree.

The degree was considered most important in the early years of Freemasonry, following closely on the heels of the Hiram legend which probably appeared in England around 1725; although many historians have traced the earliest origins of the degree to the Accepted Lodge of the Worshipful Company of Masons in London during the 1600s, or to Ireland late in that century. There is a competing school of thought which suggests that the degree originated in France and was transplanted to England shortly before 1730. Still others believe that it originated in the guild system of the Middle Ages.

Irrespective of the degree's debated origin, the Holy Royal Arch degree existed as a follow-up to introduce the Second Temple well before the 1751 founding of the so-called 'Antients' Grand Lodge (the “Mother Grand Lodge” from which all current grand lodges in the United States are descended), and was included from the start in the Antients' ritual as the fourth degree. The earliest reference to the physical “Royal Arch” was contained in an article in the 10 January 1743 edition of *Faulkner's Dublin Journal*, in which it was reported that the Royal Arch

was carried in the previous month's Saint John's Day Masonic parade by two Excellent Masons in front of the Master of the lodge. The following year, a Dublin physician, Fifield D'Assigny, published *A Serious and Impartial Inquiry into the Cause of the Present Decay of Freemasonry in the Kingdom of Ireland* in which he refers to the degree and its then-exclusivity to past masters. The degree ceremony is known to have been practiced in England, Scotland, Ireland and France by 1745; and by 1753 in Fredericksburg, Virginia. The various versions and segments of the degree were synthesised by Sir Thomas Dunkerley in 1765-1766 into something resembling the modern ritual.

So dogmatic was the Mother Grand Lodge on the subject of the *ne plus ultra* status of the Holy Royal Arch degree, that in 1813, when the two Grand Lodges in England united, a firm and solemn landmark was adopted and placed in the Articles of Union to guide Freemasons throughout the world forever on this matter: "Pure Ancient Freemasonry consists of but three degrees, viz. that of Entered Apprentice, Fellow craft, and Master Mason, *including the Supreme Order of the Holy Royal Arch.*" [emphasis added]. That statement is presumably the origin of the remarks addressed to the candidate at the concluding stage of the exaltation ceremony as it is practised in England: "You may perhaps imagine that you have this day taken a fourth degree in Freemasonry, such however is not the case, it is the Master Masons' completed."

The landmark has never been changed; and, to this day, no other degree has been officially recognised by the Mother Grand Lodge. The intent was that every rite, system or additional degree in Freemasonry cannot confer its degree on a Master Mason until he has been exalted as a Holy Royal Arch Mason. Naturally, the Grand Royal Arch Chapter of Illinois feel this is as it should be, because a man is not truly a Master Mason until he receives the Master's Word and he can only receive it in the Holy Royal Arch. In the United States, this intent has remained in practice within the scheme of orders, rites and bodies collectively known as the "York Rite". The additional orders – be they subject to petition such as Cryptic Freemasonry (a.k.a. Royal & Select Masters) and the chivalric orders (the Knights Templar), (among others), or exclusive to invitation such as the Allied Masonic Degrees and Red Cross of Constantine (among many others) – are closed to any man who has not been exalted to the supreme degree of Holy Royal Arch Mason.

In 1752, ambulatory or military warrants for lodges were introduced. This was instrumental in placing the supreme degree of Holy Royal Arch Mason on a par with that of Master Mason. Military lodges were greatly responsible for planting Freemasonry in the Colonies and also gave birth to use of the Mark and Royal Arch Degrees in the "New World" of the Americas. Lodge records show that the Holy Royal Arch degree was conferred at Fredericksburg Lodge No. 4 on 12 December 1753. George Washington was raised in this lodge on 4 August of the same year.

The degree is sometimes referred to as the "Royal Arch of Zerubbabel" to distinguish it from the 13° of the Ancient Accepted Scottish Rite of Freemasonry, titled "The Royal Arch of Solomon" in the Southern (U.S.) Jurisdiction and in the Jurisdiction of Canada, or "Master of the Ninth Arch" in the Northern (U.S.) Jurisdiction.

The badge of the Holy Royal Arch degree consists of a triple tau (also known as a "tau cross" or "Cross of Saint Anthony") within a triangle, circumscribed, in turn, by a circle. Together, these elements allow a Royal Arch Freemason to profess his separation from the unholy and profane, his reverence for G-d, and his belief in the future and eternal life.

The tau is the mark described at Ezekiel 9:4, to be placed by an angel on the foreheads of those who mourned the wickedness of the city, in order that the angel of death would forego slaying them. Thus the triple tau is symbolic of the peculiar and more eminent separation of the Holy Royal Arch Freemasons from the profane. The triple tau is constructed of three tau crosses conjoined at their feet. According to the English Royal Arch lecture, "The triple tau forms two right angles on each of the exterior lines, and another at the centre, by their union; for the three angles of each triangle are equal to two right angles." Within Royal Arch Freemasonry, the Triple Tau began as a monogram of T over H for "*Templum Hierosolymae*" (Temple of Jerusalem), appearing on the original Charter of Compact for the first Grand Chapter of England and on early Royal Arch jewels and aprons. Here, again, we have Thomas Dunkerley to thank; the monogram's meaning is evidenced in a letter he penned on 27 January 1792. The T and H lost their serifs and merged into the Triple-Tau sometime in the early 1800s. It has also been noted that the letters are the initials for "Hiram of Tyre". Also worth noting is that this degree was originally open only to past masters of craft lodges, and the three taus are essentially identical in shape to the three levels borne on the apron of an installed or past master of a lodge under English, Canadian and other jurisdictions (one level on each lower corner, and one on the bib).

The equilateral triangle, or delta, is a symbol of the sacred name of G-d, the pronunciation of which is no longer known to man. In the United States, the delta is usually depicted either in white with a thick red border and red triple-tau, or entirely red with a gold (or sometimes white) triple-tau. In English, Canadian, and some other jurisdictions, the delta's border and the triple-tau are gold, whilst the background colour of the delta denotes the companion's rank: white for companions, red for principals (i.e. the three dais officers) & Past 1st Principals (i.e. Past High Priests), blue for provincial grand chapter officers, and purple for supreme grand chapter officers.

Finally, the circle, used throughout the United States and many other jurisdictions, is a symbol of the eternal life, which is the great dogma taught by Royal Arch Freemasonry .

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For more on the development of the Triple-Tau insignia, see this, see Mendoza, Harry, *The Ensigns of the Twelve Tribes of Israel*, London: Lewis Masonic (1989) at 85.

Anointed Order of High Priesthood (unnumbered)



The Anointed Order of High Priesthood is a side, or “chair” degree, and is conferred upon present or past High Priests, typically during the time of the Grand Chapter’s annual grand convocation. It tells the story of Abraham (in Hebrew: אַבְרָהָם) returning from the slaughter of the kings, and his encounter with Melchizedek (in Hebrew: מֶלְכִּיצֶדֶק or לְמַכְצִיִּדֶק), High Priest of Salem _____. The candidate participates in a breaking of bread and sharing of wine, assumes an obligation to preside justly over his chapter, and to regard all Companion High Priests as true friends and brothers. He is then solemnly anointed, consecrated and set apart to the Holy Order of High Priesthood.

The scripture verses relevant to this degree are Genesis 14:1-3, 8-24, and Genesis 33:18-20.

The central element of the jewel of a past high priest is a representation of the breastplate worn by the High Priest in the Holy Temple of Jerusalem, its twelve precious stones representing the twelve tribes of Israel . It was through this breastplate that G-d could communicate to the High Priest by causing the air currents to flicker the light from the candle onto the two sacred jewel stones held by the High Priest, the Urim (in Hebrew: אֲוִיִּם) (representing light and excellence) and the Thummim (in Hebrew: תִּמִּיּוֹת) (representing perfection and completion), and thence reflected upon the breastplate where they would cause flashes upon the stones. A flash from each of the two sacred jewel stones onto each of the breastplate stones indicated the particular Hebrew letter engraved upon that respective stone . When not in use, the Urim and Thummim were kept in a pocket behind the breastplate. Three equilateral triangles, or deltas, are each a symbol of the sacred name of G-d, the pronunciation of which is no longer known to man. The Hebrew characters, collectively known as the Tetragrammaton, inscribed on the deltas are believed to be the consonants of that sacred name.