



Province of East Lancashire

Some Explanations of features in the Royal Arch

There is an old saying 'Familiarity breeds contempt'. Whilst this may express a feeling that is rather strong to describe our acquaintance with the Royal Arch it can certainly be true that 'familiarity breeds indifference' in that what we do is not fully understood and hence not properly valued. Let us this evening look at some features of our Royal Arch practice and see whether there is something of value to be gained by appreciating their meaning in more detail.

I begin with something that is often seen in more Northern English chapters and which no-one I have asked has been able satisfactorily to explain. When, during the opening ceremony, the three Principals have made their way to the East end near their thrones they form a second set of triangles with their feet and arms, create an arch with their hands and then respectfully utter in turn the syllables of the sacred name of the Most High. Having completed the name, they then lower & raise their linked hands in rapid succession before they separate and approach their chairs. Why do they carry out this latter action together and to what on earth does it refer? If we are not aware of what it means then why on earth do those who are sensible, grown men do it?

The answer I was once given by a Provincial 3rd Principal in the Midlands was that having disclosed the sacred name the subsequent movement of their arms signifies their closing the vault so that the name remains secure. Whilst this is an ingenious suggestion it is most unlikely to be the answer because the very first thing that Haggai & Joshua do after sharing in this action is to turn to the pedestal, remove the veil and disclose the very name they have shared. If the above explanation was correct what they do as three together would seem to be more appropriate at the CLOSING of the Chapter rather than at the opening. Something else must be the explanation.

The solution appears to lie in the opening ceremony still used in the older chapters of the USA. Let me quote from the ritual for opening a Chapter as practiced in Chicago: "The Companions form a chain joining their left and right hands. After prayer, and still around the altar, they balance three times three, that is, they raise their arms up and down at the end of which the Excellent High Priest (the equivalent of our 1st Principal) says, 'Arise' and all break the chain." It is then that all present form themselves into threes and adopt the position assumed by our 3 Principals alone for sharing the Grand Name as in England, after 1835, it became more normal for the

Principals to act on behalf of all those present, and not form them into threes, though some Chapters still do so, especially at the closing, it would seem that what happened in England was that when the Grand Name was to be shared the 3 Principals carried out the earlier affirmation of unity and agreement by raising and lowering the hands, either four times or, as is still the practice in some English Chapters, 3 times 3 or nine times. Thus is another old practice preserved, even if not understood.

We turn next to the seven steps, 3, 2 and 2. We take these steps so much for granted that it may hardly ever occur to us to enquire why we take them or why we take them in the sequence, 3, 2 and 2. Before we examine this matter more closely what we might also reflect on is the fact that whilst some currently think that the Holy Royal Arch is a further step in our Masonic progress it would appear from the 7 steps we take that it is no such thing. We take three steps to the pedestal in the E.A. degree. We take two more, making 5, in the Fellowcraft degree; and we take two more, making 7, in the Master Mason degree. Why then do we only take 7 steps to approach the sacred vault in the Royal Arch? Could it actually be that seven is the true and complete number in ancient Masonry and marks the point at which a Free and Accepted Mason has attained his goal?

What we learn further about the use of the 3:2:2 steps and their origin seems to confirm this conclusion. The steps, as we now have them in the Holy Royal Arch, are part of what remains of the ceremony adopted in many 18th century Chapters and called either the Super Excellent degree or "the Veils". In this ceremony, as still preserved in Ireland and Scotland, and revived in 20th century Bristol, the candidates passed, with these steps, through three veils whose colours are now retained in the robes of J, H, and Z. The steps took them in turn to three stages of the Old Testament story of the Exodus or 'way out' from exile. The first step took them to where Moses was pleading with Pharaoh at court and changed his rod

into a serpent in order to impress the Egyptian ruler with his skill. The message of this stage is, by the omniscience of God revealed in his servant, the slaves seek freedom from their bondage. The next step takes them into the wilderness where they are fed by the Lord with 'manna', a Hebrew word which means "what is this?", thus expressing their wonder at the power, the omnipotence, of the Lord over nature. The third step takes them into the very heart of the tabernacle that was

constructed by Moses, Aholiab and Bezaleel, to the Holy of Holies, where the Ark of the covenant stood, on the top of which was a golden plate where, they believed, the Most High came and rested whenever the cloud of glory, called the Shekinah, covered the tabernacle. God was thus ever present, omnipresent, with them. Not surprisingly the candidates bowed after taking each of the sets of steps because at each point they acknowledged the wisdom, power and presence of the Almighty Architect. That is why some Chapters take the steps along with the familiar words, Omniscient, Omnipotent, Omnipresent. Now at least we can understand why these terms are used at the Chapter's opening.

When they had taken these three steps they arrived at a white veil behind which sat the 3 Grand Masters representing the threefold nature of the Deity, a fact once clearly stated in the Royal Arch ritual. This is why, with respect, when the Companions stand to their staves during the obligation of a candidate the 2 Scribes, robed in white, should stand at the east end of the staves for they represent the presence of a white Veil leading to the inner sanctuary. It is also why, in some of our oldest Chapters, it is the Scribes, not J. and H., who remove and replace a veil on the pedestal.

What is perhaps even more surprising when we think about it is that the first three steps in modern Masonry signify a candidate's entry, as a free man, into a new life as an E.A. The next two steps take us into the fellowship of our free family where we are called to study the secrets of nature and science; whilst the last two steps are meant to take us from the entrance of the temple to where the Holy of Holies stood with the Ark of the Covenant, as shown beyond the parted curtains displayed on many third degree tracing boards. That is why Ancient Masonry did consist of 3 degrees ONLY, INCLUDING the Holy Royal Arch. There are NO MORE ancient steps to take.

The next feature is that, as in the Craft, the candidate is called upon to follow and trust a companion who takes him on a PERAMBULATION. Why is this essential and what does its form teach us? The first message that is meant to be conveyed is that what the exaltee is now about to experience has some connection with Craft degrees through which he has already passed. His entry into this next stage of masonic experience requires that he shall be recognised and accepted by the R.A. Masons whom he is about to join and hence he is paraded. He is again blindfolded because he has once again to learn the important lesson of trust and dependence which was the essential condition of his first acceptance in the Craft. Master Mason he may be

CALLED but he has again to accept the role of a newcomer to the mysteries now to be unfolded. He must follow where his leader conducts him.

It is therefore important that he should also learn that he is not being led around a SQUARE space as was the case previously. At the very least he needs to be led up one pillar and by the curve of an arch before he returns along another pillar. What may be a surprise to you is the fact that in places as far apart as Cambridge and Preston, Lancashire, it is still the practice for the Royal Arch candidate to be led from the west a short way up the north, passing then to the south over the floor cloth and through the staves, up to the east where the curve of the arch is made, down the north and again through the staves to the south before turning right to the west. Why do they still retain this 18th century practice? The answer is that this was the sort of route that an Ancient Mason would have taken in his search for a keystone that was lost. Since the Royal Arch was closely allied to Mark Masonry as its preparation these Chapters preserve this form of their perambulation to remind a candidate of what he would already have experienced as a Mark Master Mason. They then add the further feature of a Catenarian arch in the East to indicate "the further progress he is to make in the science". The form and use of the perambulation should be seen as very important indeed.

We turn next to one of the persistent puzzles of our Order. Why do we normally say that the exalte is approaching 'the crown of a vaulted chamber' when he is clearly going to encounter an arch, and how is he able to be lowered through a dome when it has a keystone and two arch-stones? Why are we surprised if some members of the Order are utterly confused, particularly when none of this is ever explained? The solution to the problem appears when we learn that what we have joined together here are the remnants of TWO different legends. The first legend was connected with the building of the First Temple and told of the building of an underground arched tunnel that led to a chamber immediately beneath the Holy of Holies (or Sanctum Sanctorum). As with the room above it this underground chamber had an arch with a keystone at its entrance and it was through this arch that anyone who wished to enter the chamber had to make his way. It was, traditionally, in this chamber that the 3 Grand Masters met during the building of the first temple and here that the body of Hiram Abif was laid, "as near the Sanctum Sanctorum as Israelitish law would permit". The removal of the keystone and its adjacent arch-stones was thus one symbolic way of gaining access to where the sacred pedestal stood.

The other legend was an early Christian one recorded by a man called Philostorgius. He said that whilst excavations of the holy sites in Jerusalem were taking place a dome giving forth a hollow sound was discovered and on opening up a hole in this dome a man was let down into the vault beneath and discovered a parchment bearing part of the gospel of St. John. This was how a second method of entering the chamber was put on record. When the two methods are combined we can see how what at first seems a conflict of ideas is resolved. Since the symbolic discovery is of much more importance than the actual methods of its disclosure we can happily continue to use our rituals. Understanding how they arose can at least remove any bewilderment.

There is another aspect of the discovery made in the crypt or vault that is also not usually known. What is the real origin of the procedure by which the sojourner makes the symbolic descent? Why does he have a cord attached to his body and its two free ends held by his assistants? It was a Jewish friend and Companion in Sheffield who at last enlightened me on this matter. In the books of commentary that accompany the Hebrew Scriptures there is an explanation of what happened on the Fast of Yom Kippur when the High Priest made his annual entry into the Holy of Holies on behalf of the whole Jewish nation. As this important event could only be undertaken by the High Priest alone in what was a totally darkened room the precaution was taken of having a cord wound around his robes so that if, when he was alone in the Sanctum Sanctorum, in Hebrew called the 'debir', and he became faint or ill, he could communicate to the two other priests, holding the ends of his cord, when he was needing to be drawn out. Since, as we have seen, the crypt or vault was associated with the Debir, it is hardly surprising that this further custom should be incorporated into our ceremony. It only emphasises again the sacred nature of what we are about. We come next to a feature of the Holy Royal Arch that receives some regular attention but which deserves further thought, the Grand Chapter certificate. We are all well aware of its importance and will have heard many styles of presentation. We will have had our attention drawn to the various connections with the Craft which are included in its design - the words in the heading of the certificate, the blazing star reminding us of the divine Creator, the chequered pavement and the same seal as that of the Grand Lodge, save for the words that surround it. What is not often, if at all, mentioned is that the object occupying the centre of the certificate is not the double cube or pedestal that we are accustomed to see in the Chapter room but the pedestal that stands before the Worshipful Master's chair or, in some old lodges still, as a separate item of furniture on the floor of a lodge, used for the obligating of

candidates. That, if nothing else, confirms the old practice of conferring the Holy Royal Arch in a Craft setting. If you were not aware the practice, then was to set a miniature form of the double cube upon such a pedestal and so signify that a completing stage of Masonry was about to be experienced.

Whilst we say that the seal on the certificate is the same as that of the grand Lodge with the arms of the Moderns and Ancients Grand Lodges what is not usually mentioned is that these are surrounded by the Ark of the Covenant, that is flanked by the arched-winged seraphim and has beneath it the Hebrew words that were once inscribed on the headdress of the Jewish High Priest. These words, 'Kodesh lo Adonai', translate as: 'Holiness to the Lord'. It is thought by some that the Ark of the Covenant had nothing to do with Craft or

Royal Arch Masonry but its design on the seal reminds us that that idea is quite wrong. As I mentioned earlier a study of many third degree tracing boards will reveal that this sacred object is shown at the centre of such a board where the veil over the entrance to the Holy of Holies is lifted. Why that is so no-one ever explains in the Master Mason degree and, as was noted earlier, the discontinuance of the Veils ceremony meant that any clear reference to the Ark was lost.

Why is it, however, that in at least two old Devon Chapters a model of the Ark is placed at the foot of the double cube and in the oldest lodge in Lewes, Sussex, such an Ark of the Covenant is displayed on the lodge floor at every meeting? The truth is that whilst only the Bristol Chapters retain the Ark in their working the need to recognize the centrality of this object in our Masonry is with us as long as our certificates remain.

And that is not the whole story. I mentioned early in this talk the 7 steps taken by the Principals when a Chapter is opened or by a candidate approaching the vault. There is yet one more explanation of these steps that is most appropriate here. The steps can be seen to represent the 7 stages passed by a believer entering the Temple in Jerusalem by the great, golden gate in the East. One step would take him into the Court of the Gentiles, the second into the Court of the Women, the third into the Court of the Men. The fourth into the Court of the Sacrifices and the fifth into the porch way or entrance where Boaz and Jachin stood. The sixth takes one into the Holy Place and the seventh into the Holy of Holies in the West. And now just consider this well-

known ritual as you or I would have stood symbolically in the inner temple of King Solomon:

“Whence come you?” “From the east” (the porch way/entrance) “Whither directing your course?” “The west” (Holy of Holies) “What inducement have you to leave the east and go to the W.? “To seek for that which was lost, which, with your instruction and our own endeavours, we hope to find.” (Note the aim) “What is that which is lost?” “The GENUINE secrets of a M.M.” The conclusion therefore must be: it is here that we now find them in the presence of the Ark of the Covenant in the west. Is it any wonder that the Holy Royal Arch came to be called the Summum Bonum, the ultimate good of Freemasonry?

EComp. the Revd Neville Barker Cryer, M.A, PGSoj Prestonian Lecturer 1974:
Batham Lecturer 1996-8.

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