

Moses, Aholiab and Bezaleel

A lecture previously given by The Revd Neville Barker Cryer

There are two noticeable differences between the practices of the oldest Chapters in the Northern and the Southern parts of Britain. One of these is that those in the South almost always conduct the catechism between the Most Excellent and the Principal Sojourner at the festive board whilst those in the North either omit it altogether or include it before the Chapter is closed. This difference struck me forcibly when I returned to the North to live some 10 years ago and made me appreciate the congruity of the questions asked as part of the whole Chapter story. What I have wondered in either case, however, is what would be the consternation of the P.S. if, after he had finished his usual answers, he heard the Most Excellent add: "These are the usual questions. I will put others if any Companion wishes me to do so." For were there such an invitation I think I might be tempted to enquire: "Most Excellent, might I enquire of the P.S., through you, why are Moses, Aholiab and Bezaleel so important? Who were the two latter anyway and what gave them the right to be numbered amongst the officers presiding over the First, or Holy, Lodge?" That, I fancy, would give rise to an even more serious pause in the proceedings than when in Surrey I heard the question: "How many Grand Lodges do we commemorate?" answered by the word 'Four' to which the Most Excellent replied, "Well, just name 3 of them".

Yet there these characters are. 3 names, and especially the latter two, but only briefly referred to when all the other names, Solomon, the Hiram, Z., H. and J. are so very fully communicated to us. And in case you are inclined to protest that Moses does have a modest airing in the part of our ceremony referring to the signs or in one of the Installations of the Principals I am still prepared to assert that there is much more that we could usefully know about that great Patriarch which would make our Royal Arch ceremonies even more meaningful. Let me give you one example by referring to the other distinctive difference between North and South.

It is obvious to me that Chapters in Yorkshire make much more use of the rods or staves that in the South appear only for the investiture of the newest Exalte. Let me moreover emphasize that in the South only ONE Companion is invested whereas in older Northern workings there is still the practice of clothing and addressing 3 Sojourners, as they do still in the U.S.A. (In Philadelphia, indeed, they will not do the ceremony unless there are 3 candidates.)

Why are the rods/staves important? Because they represent the power and authority bestowed upon Moses by the Almighty when he commanded him, after the encounter at the burning bush, to lead the

people of Israel from exile in Egypt to the Promised Land. The parallel between that Hebrew incident and the return from the exile in Babylon that surrounds our Royal Arch ceremony is not to be overlooked and that is why, in the old ceremony of the Veils (which in Pontefract is still so clearly recalled), the preliminary story for a Candidate was Moses's progress from using the rod that turned into a serpent in Egypt to the use of the rod in the Sinai Wilderness. And there was something more.

The rod of Moses was, by ancient Jewish tradition, a branch of the Tree of Knowledge that was taken by Adam when he was turned out of the Garden of Paradise. He handed it on to his son, Seth, who in turn bequeathed it to Enoch. It then passed via Methusaleh, Noah, Shem and Nimrod to the family of Abraham and thence to the priestly line of the Hebrews so that at last it reached Jethro in the land of Midian. He it was who bestowed it upon his shepherd son-in-law, Moses himself.

Whatever you and I in this modern age may or may not believe about that ancestral account that is the story that our earliest 18th century ritual formers accepted when they came to establish our Royal Arch working. That is why, in the earliest known R.A. manuscripts that we yet possess (circa 1780) we are told that in preparation for a Royal Arch ceremony all the Companions would form up in the ante-room in twos all holding staves. Those who still do this are in the truly ancient tradition. Yet how fully do we realise that in doing this we are associating ourselves with that great Patriarch who led the people of God from exile into the way that would lead them, but not him, into the Promised land of Israel.

What more fitting introduction could there be to the start of another 'Exile' experience such as we re-enact in our Chapters? Moreover, in our older Northern Chapters, we also raise the staves in a form of greeting which forms a row of arches when the Candidate(s) finally has the blindfold removed. This very gesture forms just such a row of subterranean arches as were associated with Enoch whose rod this also was, whilst the individual gesture is what Moses adopted whenever he had a new command to utter to the people and would draw their attention to his words. What better action than when the Most Excellent is about to welcome the newly exalted Companion to the sacred place of the T. & L.G.M.H. There is much more that one could say about Moses alone but I hope that this will convince you that there are aspects of the Royal Arch — even in its most modern guise — which we can with profit investigate for our greater interest and advancement. This is no less true in regard to Aholiab and Bezaleel.

Let me here refer you to some words written in a book that was written some ten years ago by the then District G.M. of Hong Kong, Christopher Haffner. Speaking of steps beyond the Craft he says:

"The Mason sees his forebears no longer as the operative masons of mediaeval cathedrals and biblical temples, but in fellow

seekers of truth. Moses, Aholiab and Bezaleel take pride of place over King Solomon as the first creators of the (worship place) which Jehovah deigned to honour, and the leader of that team (Moses) was not the craftsman but the person to whom the (then unpronounceable) Sacred Name had been revealed.” He then adds at once, with a meaning that I hope you will understand better in a few moments, “Noah, as the first to build a divinely inspired structure, also takes a major place in the drama.. May I suggest, as was certainly true of myself that few of us have ever quite seen the order of this interchange as Bro. Haffner describes it. And if in fact this is what it is really saying then does it not behove us to recollect more than we do just who these persons were, and are, for us. Moses was also, as his name suggests, the one ‘drawn out’, not only out of the water as a babe, nor only from the temporal riches of a royal palace but even from amongst his own native race. All this was so that he might become the channel of God’s commands and blessing. ‘Drawn out’ of the vast crowd of wandering people in Sinai he is intimately instructed in what God wants done. Thus, in order to achieve the work of housing the very presence of God’s holiness and making a place for His Ineffable Name to dwell, Moses approaches God for help. Here I turn once more to the work of the Jewish Rabbis to give you the non-biblical story.

“How shall I make thy tabernacle?”, Moses asks. The Holy One answers, “Make my dwelling place on earth like that on high.” “Am I God to make it so?”, queries Moses. “Behold, the book of the Generations of Adam contains the destinies of every mortal, from the birth of living things to the resurrection of the dead. In it thou wilt find the name of him whom I have named to build my sanctuary.” Moses read in the book and found the name — it was that of Bezaleel. He was the son of Hur, whom the Israelites killed when he had tried to stop them making the idol of the golden calf. It was because Hur had so perished that God chose his son to make this divine Tabernacle — just as later he was to choose another son, Solomon, to make the Temple that copied that tabernacle exactly but as a permanent structure. Moses further read that Bezaleel was filled with the spirit of Wisdom and Understanding and that his name signified ‘In the shadow (or, under the protection) of EL, who is God’. What was more the choice that Moses thus made of this workman was confirmed by the whole people when they were consulted.

That they chose well is revealed by another recorded incident: ‘On being commanded to make the Tabernacle the young man asked Moses: “Wherefore the Tabernacle?”. “So that it might receive within it the Torah”, was the reply. “But where shall we place the Torah?” “When you have made the Tabernacle then we shall make an Ark for it.” “But is it good that the Holy Law should lie, unhoused, until the dwelling for the

Lord's Name is complete? Surely we should make first the Ark for the Covenant of the Torah and then build the Tabernacle for them.

"Truly", said Moses, "You merit your name, Bezaleel, for as your wisdom shows you live in the shadow of God."

Bezaleel was the Hebrew who had studied under the foremost goldsmiths of Egypt and even as a boy had been instructed in decoration by Pharaoh's Master of the Jewellery. It was because he had shown such innate skill and application in this field that he had escaped being sent to the mud pits where his fellow Hebrews were trying to make bricks. This is the one whom the VSL describes in saying:

He had 'ability for every kind of artistic work — for planning skilful designs, and working them in gold and silver and bronze; for cutting jewels to be set; for carving wood and for every other kind of artistic work.' (Exodus 31: verse 4) This is the forerunner of Hiram Abiff in the construction of another Holy Place and, in the imaginary re-creation of the life of Moses by author, Scholem Asch, we have this marvellous passage referring to Bezaleel:

"And this great architect of the whole, the Master of all the Crafts, sat in his tent taking counsel with his chief assistants, Master Craftsmen like himself; and with his own hands he produced the intimate vessels of the service, the most sacred implements of the Sanctuary. All the arts were fused and united in his masterpieces (especially the great seven-branched candlestick called the Menorah) and in his craftsmanship he sang out the song of creation before God's face; and in every vessel which he created he renewed the inspiration of his contact with the highest spheres." (p. 283) It is not only in the Bible, in the Rabbinic authors and in present day literature that we encounter Bezaleel. He is present in neglected parts of some of the oldest Speculative Masonic writings that we possess. In 1726 a document was produced with the title "The Whole Institutions of Free Masonry opened and proved by the best of Tradition and still some reference to Scripture". Its more usual name is the Graham MS. and it contains just the kind of legendary matter which James Anderson, the author of our First Constitutions, may have had before him when he made up his own 'history' of early Masonry.

It is in such a document that we come across the phrase 'the Master Mason... ought to have a trible [sic] voice in teaching of our secrets if he be a bright man' and this is followed by mention of the Sanhedrin, the 70 who 'had great power'. There then follows a long passage about Noah and his three sons with a graveside scene which has a great deal in it that resembles our present 3rd Degree ceremony. I cannot give you that part of the story because of time but I must relate what follows: 'then was born Bazaliell [sic] who was so Called of God before [he was] conceived in the [womb] and this holy man knew by inspiration that the secret titles and primitive pallies [parleys or

speaking together) of the Godhead was preservitiv [sic] and he builded on them in so much that no infernall squandering spirit durst presume to shake his handy work so his works became so ffameious [sic], while the two younger brothers of the aforesaid king... desired for to be instructed by him [in] his noble siance [sic] by which he wrought to which he agreed conditionally [that] they were not to discover it without another to themselves to make a trible voice so they entered oath and he taught them the heroick and the practick part of masonry and they did work..., then was masons numbered with kings and princes yet near to the death of Bazaliell he desired to be buried in the valey of Jehosephate and have cut over him according to his diserveing [sic] Here Lys the flowr of masonry superior of many other companion to a king and to two princes a brother Here Lys the heart all secrets could conceal Here Lys the tongue that never did reveal — Now after his death the inheritance thereabout did think that the secrets of masonry had been totally lost because they were no more heard of, for none knew the secrets thereof save these two princes, and they were so sworn at their entering not to discover it without another to make a trible voice yet it is to be believed and also understood that such a holy secret could never be lost while any good servant of God remained alive on earth for every good servant of God had, hath and always will have a great part of that holy secret alltho they know it not themselves nor by what means to make use thereof...'

Would you ever have believed that Bezaleel could have been so wrapped up in the very fabric of Masonry that we are engaged in what, surely, was an already incipient Royal Arch Masonry 20 years before the first recorded mention of anything that we can definitely describe as such? Bezaleel is part and parcel of our very tradition from the earliest days.

And then — what of Aholiab? Who and what is he? His name can only be translated from the Hebrew as 'The Father's Tent' and we will not therefore be surprised to find that he was cunning above all others in the weaving of figures into purple cloth. It was under his direction that there were made the three curtains for the entrance to the Holy of Holies (or Sanctum Sanctorum) — the blue, the purple and the red with a plain white cotton veil as their inner layer. It is perhaps only a coincidence but it is nonetheless singular that Aholiab's contribution to the whole Royal Arch ceremony and the recognized significance of his name both disappeared from our ritual when the Super Excellent degree (or passing of the Veils) was lost to English R.A. Masonry. With the discontinuance of that part of our ceremonies also went the rich significance of the parting of the Temple curtains which yet remains on our 2nd and 3rd Degree tracing boards.

For the tabernacle the creation of tapestries, hangings and carpets was no less important than the wooden planks and the iron or bronze

fittings that kept the portable Tabernacle together as well as the vessels of precious metals that it contained when set up. The creation of this wilderness Holy Place was a joint enterprise and it is Rabbi Hanina who once pointed out the wisdom of God in the choice of craftsmen that he made. It becomes clear that in placing Bezaleel, a son of the tribe of Judah, alongside Aholiab, a son of Dan, God was underlining some words of Scripture: 'There is nought greater than Judah and nought smaller than Dan and yet there is neither great nor small in the eye of the Eternal'. What was also striking was that as Bezaleel was the son of Hur who had opposed the making of the Golden Calf statue, so Aholiab was the son of Ahisamech, who was one of the fashioners of that same idol. Here, then, in the cooperation of Moses's companions we see a new stage of brotherly love and reconciliation. The gifts of soldering and weaving were used in conjunction for more than a merely practical reason. Here was a peculiar masonic system of morality, veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols.

My Companions, the time has come to close this address. There is more that could be said about these Royal Arch characters. Consider only these items:

Where did Moses get the idea of an 'Ark' from?

How did Bezaleel know the shape and style of Cherubim to fashion?

What designs did Aholiab weave into the curtains and why?...

and we at once realize how much more there is to know about these ancient Master Craftsmen. I only hope that enough has been said this evening to awaken in our hearts new ideas and new vistas as we share in the catechism between a M. Excellent and the PS. whenever and wherever it occurs. Let us not simply mouth the names and ignore their rich meanings. Let us conjure up for ourselves that august trio, so easily passed by, and recognize that here, in faith and labour, in worship and works, is the very heart of any Holy Lodge — or Chapter. May we not only revere, but respectfully emulate, these ancestors of our ceremonies. May they preside over us in deed and heart as well as in words: Moses, Aholiab and Bezaleel, three truly Grand Originals.