

Is the Royal Arch really the Supreme Degree?

What is it that I hear you saying? “How can there be any doubt? Doesn’t this Companion know that the words of the ritual make it quite clear? Just listen: “Companions, the mystical knowledge of this Supreme Degree...” (or) “This Supreme Degree inspires its members with the most exalted ideas of God... “(or) those lessons of morality which we as members of this Supreme Degree are bound to practise.” Surely this takes the matter beyond debate or any further speculation? There is nothing to consider and therefore we cannot have the proposed lecture... Is that what you are thinking? Well, just wait a moment.

If you are going to quote the ritual to make your point then let us have a look at the ritual again. What does it say this time? “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 Mason’s completed...” (or) “a perfect knowledge of this Supreme Degree can no otherwise be obtained than by passing those several Chairs.”

What does this say to us? First, that according to regulation in this Royal Arch we do not have a degree at all. If there is a degree it is the Master Mason’s of which this is but a disjointed part. What then is to be said to those who contend — and if you do not know such brethren in this part of the world then believe me that there are such brethren in abundance in English Masonry generally — that when you have reached the point of being raised to the sublime degree of a Master Mason you have achieved all that you need and all other parts of the Masonic structure are secondary if not irrelevant?

Strive as you might to press the point that surely there were unrevealed secrets at the death of Hiram Abiff which can now be made known to the seeking companion, the fact remains that if you are talking about ‘degrees’ there is no other approved of by Grand Lodge beyond the Master Mason and if you have attained that, then that is all that is required. If there are secrets then so what? Not everyone reaches the Master’s Chair and receives the secrets there but he is still a recognized Mason and if he wishes not to uncover what was concealed by the Grand Masters after Hiram Abiff’s death then that is surely quite in order. He is not missing a degree for there is no other to achieve — only some more information which costs more time, more money, more regalia and distraction from Lodge affairs, whilst in no way invalidating his

achieved sublime status. This is not, let me hasten to add, a position I would myself defend but having talked the matter over with a number of very senior or long serving brethren who refuse to become Royal Arch Masons I do know the way they tick. In what sense can we possibly assert, and convince them, that what we do in the Royal Arch is to share in a Supreme Degree?

Or again, take the second last quotation I gave you. Even if you convince such a brother eventually that he does need to enhance his Master Mason's status by accruing the 'lost secrets' of the third degree what are we to say to him when, having taken that step, he is faced with the assertion that even when the Exaltation ceremony is over he has still not acquired all that comprises the Holy Royal Arch? How can we say that what happens to those who are candidates in a Royal Arch ceremony is the fulfilment of what they missed in the Master Mason degree when in the Symbolical Lecture we so clearly assert that WHAT THEY HAVE GONE THROUGH is incomplete and only by going through the Royal Arch Chairs — a fairly time-consuming process which also requires you to have gone through your Craft Chair — is that further knowledge going to be achieved? I can still recall, 45 years on, the shock I felt in being told this news — for in those days all 3 Lectures were delivered at every Exaltation (and that was in Chapter of Affability, East Lancashire). Oh, I thought, just when I truly believed that now I could claim to have perfected my Craft Masonry I am told that it is still incomplete. Even if I had been of the opinion — and I still am — that I had definitely taken another firm and distinct step along the Masonic way (and another word for step is 'degree') then however supreme it might appear to be, or be claimed as being, I now had to take three more steps before the 'supremacy' could be grasped. Perhaps you are now a little clearer as to why I entitled this address as I did? Having the words 'Supreme Degree' in the ritual is one thing but when you set them against other words you begin to have doubts. What can we say about them if we are to resolve the difficulty?

The first thing is to understand a little bit of earlier English Masonic history. When our present Craft emerges at the end of the 17th century there was one degree, the Fellow of the Craft, which soon divided into two by creating the Entered Apprentice. Even when the new Grand Lodge was formed its first decade was passed with no evidence whatsoever that any other degree was available or intended. Private lodges were not even allowed to appoint or install their new Masters except at, or in connection with, the Grand Lodge Quarterly Communications. That is why, to

this day, the new Craft Master is chosen from a lodge in the Fellow Craft degree and only according to the regulations laid down by Grand Lodge, though the appointment of other officers can vary to some extent according to the lodge's by-laws.

In or around 1726 there begins to emerge a degree formed in part from the previous Fellow of the Craft and called 'the Master Mason's raising'. It was not restricted to 'Masters' of a lodge, in the sense of presiding or ruling officers, but it was also not a degree that everyone automatically received. To become a Master Mason was a distinction and seemed to be a real step forward, and the fact that it was called a 'Master's degree' must have begun to suggest that those who reached this sublime step were in some special sense 'Masters' of the Craft in their lodges. I find it not in the least surprising that, human nature being what it is, the time soon came — and some evidence now acquired suggests that it as soon after 1730 (about 5 years later) — that there was introduced a further step, called a degree, which was able to be acquired only by those who were real 'Masters of Lodges', i.e. those who had actually presided over a lodge in the east. This new degree was to be called 'The Holy Royal Arch' by those who practised it and after 1751 the Antients Grand Lodge, which was to urge it as an essential step for every true Mason, also regarded it as the 'root, heart and marrow' of Freemasonry. (I find it intriguing, incidentally, to note that there is here an echo of one interpretation in that century of the Antients' word for the third degree — 'marrowbone' for 'mahabone') Even before the time of the Antients, in 1735, we have of course that intriguing reference to a house party at (Thames) Ditton in Surrey which states: "Hollis and Desaguliers have been super-excellent in their different ways... On Sunday Night at a Lodge in the Library, St. John, Albemarle and Russell were made chapters (men)..."

The fact that as the century progressed Sunday was the day for Chapter meetings is itself significant in view of this early reference but there is also the fact that 3 candidates were then admitted. To this day many of the American State Grand Lodges require that there shall be 3 candidates before an Exaltation ceremony can proceed — a fact that has, as we see, this early precedent. (The 3 Sojourners were of course originally the 3 candidates.) Already one can detect the fact that here was a step (or degree) that took one out of the range of the ordinary lodge mason. Even when the premier Grand Lodge adopted a form of Royal Arch Masonry it still kept the requirement that only those who were elected ruling Masters of lodges could apply to be

exalted. It was a requirement that was to stand until 1823. In this sense it was a super or supreme step which carried its own cachet of being important. It was the Antients who coined the actual word with which we are here concerned. Listen to this extract from the regulations of that Grand Lodge called 'Ahiman Rezon' (The Good Secretary's Guide): This degree is certainly more august, sublime and important than those which precede it and it is the summit and perfection of Antient Masonry. It impresses on our minds a more firm belief of the existence of a Supreme Deity... [Our aim is] That this Supreme Degree may be conducted with that regularity, order and solemnity becoming the sublime intention with which from time immemorial it has been held..."

Yet whilst this seems to put the case simply and starkly for answering 'yes' to our title, "Is the Royal Arch really the Supreme Degree?" there are three other things in the period of the 18th century Antients which have to be borne in mind.

First: the degrees that preceded the Royal Arch were more than just the three that we know. Definitely by 1770 we have ample evidence that in the north of England, and on both sides of the Pennines, the Royal Arch ceremony was considered as following the Chair degree of Installed Master, the Excellent (or Past Master) degree, and the Super Excellent (or Veils) degree, leading finally to the Holy Royal Arch.

As evidence of the Veils we have the signed receipt of 1769 in the Chapter of Vigilance of Darlington where 60 yards of worsted curtain fabric, curtain rods and rings were purchased for £2 5s.9d. (Since there had to be 3 curtains across the width of the room about £200 in today's money is not exceptional). Is it any wonder that when, as is common in Scotland to the present day, a Mason passed through such a series of steps he should emerge from the final, white veil to think of himself as being at a very supreme step indeed? The whole perspective was richer, deeper and longer.

The second factor was the Christian nature of the degree which was not affected until after the creation of the Supreme Grand Chapter in 1817. What is evident in such early rituals of the Holy Royal Arch as we possess is that it was unashamedly Trinitarian.

Even to this day the echoes are still there, despite the removal of those remarkable words which many of us learnt by heart — Father Lord, Word Lord, Spirit Lord. What else are we to make of the words we use, "The union of the triple tau alludes to

the Grand Triune Deity” and how can any ceremony be said to be wholly de-Christianized which still ends with the New Testament song of the angels, “Glory to God on high, on earth peace, goodwill towards men”? What the earlier Royal Arch companions of the 18th century chapters were being led to was a veil of the Temple, woven of blue, purple and crimson, which had been thrust aside so that we might enter the Holy of Holies itself and see that trio of Sacred Rulers whose union alone was the source of the true name and word of God and without one of whom the name and being were incomplete.

I am not pleading that this is how it ought to be today. What I am saying is that when it was like this it was inevitable that with such a revelation there was nothing more to be revealed. This was the end, the culmination of human searching, the SUPREME step, or degree.

The third factor, and it is one which we ignore at our peril, is that the Holy Royal Arch was not considered the end of the process.

Even before the first fully recorded Royal Arch ceremony in England there had been ceremonies by which Masons became Knights Templar and Knights of Malta, and by the end of the 18th century there were also Rose Croix and Red Cross knights being recognised in Antients’ lodges. The significant thing is that despite this extended vista of Masonry the Royal Arch was still referred to as the ‘Supreme Degree’. Why this should be so when some of these Knights’ degrees were called ‘ne plus ultra’ (which means ‘You can’t get further than this’) is in itself remarkable.

I can only suggest that as the Holy Royal Arch degree was the absolute requirement for being admitted to what were knightly ‘Orders’ it was certainly the ‘supreme’ attainment for a Craft Mason as without it he could not enter the knightly and purely Christian orders which they have remained to this day — by the way, with the same requirement that you have to be a Chapter Mason.

What then is our conclusion as we seek to draw together the threads of our reflection on this matter of the Holy Royal Arch as the Supreme Degree? Clearly we have to accept that for whatever reasons — and the men who shaped our present Royal Arch ritual in 1834 did not leave us specific explanations for their changes — the mere use of the term ‘degree’ in our ritual books is a relic of the past that has no substance whatsoever today. I was thus intrigued to see in the Staffordshire Royal Arch ritual book published in 1995 that they throughout refer to ‘this supreme Order’. That is at least what we have to mean even if we speak the word ‘degree’ — and

if we hanker after some content for the word 'degree' in what we do then let us at least be clear that in the ceremonies for the Installations of our Principals we are no less carrying out another three steps or degrees there. Perhaps that was the problem in 1834. They could not allow the Craft Installation to be a degree so neither could they for the work in the Royal Arch.

As to the word 'Supreme' it depends on how you view the whole panoply of Freemasonry today. If you are one of those Masons who believes that there is nothing that matters beyond the Royal Arch then you may be inclined to regard the term supreme with some approval, though I recall you to my earlier query — if this is simply the fulfilment of what was really a Master Mason degree then how can you call one part of it supreme? Either it all is, Master Mason and Royal Arch together, or the whole is a misnomer because it is now divorced from its earlier and fuller context. If you are, as some Masons certainly are, convinced that, as in pre-Union Masonry, there was a very specific 'climax' or 'Spiritual goal' for Freemasonry which the makers of the Union dispersed then you will be reluctant to give this present ceremony the right to be the supreme degree of the whole fabric. "Superb" the Royal Arch undoubtedly is, 'most sublime', as the extension of the Third Degree; but 'The Supreme Degree'? Perhaps the phrase is just another relic of a past that is gone. At least it is a matter that needs thinking about and not just repeating parrot-fashion.