

## THE EARLY HISTORY OF ROYAL ARCH MASONRY

Although the subject of my Address is "The Early History of Royal Arch Masonry" it must be stated that a veil of obscurity overhangs the origination of the Degree - or Order as it is now designated. Research into its beginnings leaves us more baffled than ever, but the indication is that the ritual was evolved subsequent to the adoption of the Hiramic Legend in our Craft ritual - the date of which is likewise doubtful, but can be placed about 1725 - possibly somewhat earlier.

The R.A. ritual would in fact appear to be a natural sequence to the formula used in the closing of the 3<sup>o</sup> - the reference to the genuine Secrets. There again we are left in the air as to whether that particular reference was inserted at some later date as a means of introduction to the Royal Arch story, but it does seem to me to be a probability.

In any case there is sufficient proof available to show that it arose as a separate degree; although another school of commentators has expressed the opinion that the R.A. Legend - in one form or another - was earlier incorporated in Craft workings as the "Masters part" - i.e. in the ceremony of installation into the Master's chair - possibly as secret knowledge imparted only to Masters.

However a lot of this is bound to be pure conjecture, and all that is known with certainty is that Royal Arch Masonry had taken root and had steadily increased its popularity before the middle of the 18th Century. The dates of the earliest allusions are given in Ireland as 1743, England in 1744 and Scotland in 1745, and about these same dates in America.

Royal Arch Masonry was not however unopposedly accepted by the Craft at that period, and its adoption by some Lodges, and refusal by others, was one of the causes of the schism, which culminated in the breakaway that occurred in 1751, when one section of the Masonic community in England seceded from the, at that time, Grand Lodge, and formed a rival one which they designated the "Ancient Grand Lodge", and continued to work the R.A. degree, as distinct from the so-called "Moderns" - the first English Grand Lodge - who refused to admit it to their ceremonial, although not exclusively.

It was not until the United Grand Lodge of England came into existence that this point was regulated, and we are all aware of the formula with which the Articles of Union in 1813 accepted the Royal Arch in the Article:-

"Pure Ancient Masonry consists of three degrees and no more viz. those of the E. A. F. C. and M. M."

and they in brackets -

"Including the Supreme Order of the Royal Arch"

The declaration to the newly exalted Companion in our ritual to the effect that he has not taken a fourth degree, but merely completed the third is in the nature of a compromise, seeing that R.A. is definitely a sequel to the 3<sup>o</sup> rather than a completion of it. In Scotland, however, it is reckoned the 4<sup>o</sup>.

I do not here propose to enter into the details of the ceremony, as it is obvious they are well known to my audience, but it is as well to bear in mind that originally, like the Craft, it was a Christian degree - in fact even to-day, our version commences with the Collect for Purity "Almighty God unto whom all hearts are open etc." with which the Order of Holy Communion in our Prayer Book begins. Incidentally, this does not appear in the Scottish ritual.

There is no doubt in my mind that the elimination of <sup>Content</sup>Christianity from the Masonic Ritual caused considerable perturbation in the minds of those Masons

who were sincere Christians, and it is probable that the "Antients" retained the original Christian references in their R.A. Ritual.

Here it is interesting to note - as will be enlarged upon later in this address - that in the Arch Ritual as originally devised, the words on the scroll reputed to have been found by the Sojourner were taken from the Gospel of St. John Chapt. 1, Verse 1 - "In the beginning was the word" etc., and at a somewhat later date the quotation from Genesis Chap. 1, Verses 1-3 was transposed.

However, eventually, the Degree, as we know it, or in a similar form, was adopted by all Chapters acknowledging the jurisdiction of the principal constitutions.

We will now proceed to investigate the Legend which forms the motif of the R.A. Ritual. It varies somewhat and rather points to the probability that, if and when, the substance of the Degree came from the Continent, as some authorities assert, it reached Dublin and London in somewhat different forms. In England we adopted as our Legend the Rebuilding of K. S. Temple, whereas the Irish based theirs on the Repairing of the Temple. One authority states however that about the middle of the 18th Century the Irish R.A. did follow the same lines as England, revising it later on.

Let us first consider the Irish motif - the basis of which is obtained from the narrative related in Chapter 34 of the Second Book of Chronicles in connection with the Repairing of the Temple by Josiah the King, Hilkiah the High Priest and Shaphan the Scribe. In verse 1 it is stated that "Hilkiah the Priest found a Book of the Law of the Lord given by Moses". This happened some 400 years after the building of the Temple - K. S. T. - as described in the earlier Chapters of II Chronicles. There is here no mention of a vault discovery, but I am not acquainted with the Irish R.A. Ritual so I cannot comment further in this respect.

Now, before we proceed to examine the English motif, I desire to draw your attention to another Legend of Talmudic origin, based on a tradition which goes back to the days of Enoch before the Flood. In it is described how Enoch assisted by his son Methuselah built an underground temple which had nine arches, and in the ninth arch, he deposited, on a triangular pedestal, a plate of gold on which was engraved the ineffable name of the Most High. Enoch is then stated to have built two pillars on a mountain near by, one of brass to withstand water and the other of marble to withstand fire, and on the latter one he engraved certain hieroglyphics disclosing the concealment of the golden plate etc. underground.

These events occurred in the land of Canaan, in the country now known as Israel and the Lebanon. In my recent visit there I found several traces of ancient biblical traditions of Jewish origin, and no doubt these were known to those persons who are responsible for our rituals and who, in one form or another, incorporated them in various degrees. In the legend now referred to, it will be noted that the placing of the plate of gold has been transferred to a much later period in our Masonic story, although it still forms the basis of a degree in an American Rite. In the R.A. American Chapters, the motif of the events happening in the Rebuilding of K. S. Temple is practically the same as ours but somewhat over elaborated, with the exception that the First Principal is the High Priest, the Second the King and the Third the Scribe.

With this digression we will now proceed to what appears to me to be the origin of the vault episode in our ritual.

One Samuel Lee wrote a treatise entitled "Orbis Miraculum or the Temple of Solomon portrayed by Scripture Light" which was published in 1659 in which he repeats a story told by a Greek Chronicler - Philostorgius - (born in 364 died in 425 A. D.) It alludes to a Legend concerning the discovery of a

Secret Vault on the site in Jerusalem of the Temple of Zerubbabel, and relates the testimony of one Nicephorus Callistus, a Greek ecclesiastical historian about 1320/1330, a copy of whose book written in Latin, is in the Library at Gt. Queen Street, and of which the following is an extract. It actually refers to the attempted building of the Fourth Temple - the Temple that never was - by the Roman Emperor Julian about 360 A. D.

I want you to carefully note the following extract, which is from Samuel Lee's treatise:-

"When Julian bade the city of Jerusalem to be rebuilt in order to refute openly the predictions of our Lord concerning it, he brought about exactly the opposite of what he intended. For his work was checked by many other prodigies from heaven; and especially, during the preparations of the foundations, one of the stones which was placed at the lowest part of the base, suddenly started from its place and opened the door of a certain cave hollowed out in the rock. Owing to its depth, it was difficult to see what was within the cave; so persons were appointed to investigate the matter, who, being anxious to find out the truth, let down one of their workmen by means of a rope. On being lowered down he found stagnant water reaching up to his knees, and having gone round the place and felt the walls on every side, he found the cave to be a perfect square. Then, in his return, as he stood near about the middle, he struck his foot against a column which stood rising slightly above the water. As soon as he touched the pillar, he found lying upon it a book wrapped up in a very fine and thin linen cloth; and as soon as he had lifted it up just as he had found it, he gave a signal to his companions to draw him up again. As soon as he regained the light, he showed them the book, which struck them all with astonishment, especially because it appeared so new and fresh, considering the place where it had been found. This book, which appeared such a mighty prodigy in the eyes of both heathens and Jews, as soon as it was opened showed the following words in large letters: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.' In fact, the volume contained that entire Gospel which had been delivered by the divine tongue of the (beloved) disciple and the Virgin."

It will be noticed that there is a distinct similitude to our R. A. Vault episode, and as this Legend was first published in England in 1720 - about the period or within a decade or two when R. A. Masonry was introduced - in a translation of the Jewish historian Josephus's "Histories of South Palestine" - one can reasonably surmise that the original framers of our Ritual were acquainted with the extract and embodied it as the central incident, transferring however the occurrence to a much earlier date. Probable confirmation of this lies in the fact that the first author of our Ritual adopted the quotation from St. John's Gospel Chap. 1, Verse 1 in their version.

Before I conclude, I would make a short reference to a ceremony that was originally a preliminary to exaltation and known as "Passing the Veils" and which is now, by order of Grand Chapter, omitted from our ceremonial, although in Scottish Masonry it is worked as a separate degree prior to the exaltation ceremony, called "Excellent Masters" and in Ireland it is one of a sequence of grades - Excellent and Super Excellent also prior to the R. A.

It is a regular part of the Arch ceremony in U. S. A. and some Canadian provinces and refers symbolically - in the passage through the veils - (curtains) - to the trials and difficulties experienced by the liberated captives on their journey from Babylon to Jerusalem immediately prior to undertaking the task of Rebuilding the Temple of Zerubbabel.

In conclusion, I would mention that some authorities symbolise the three Craft degrees as representative of "Birth, Life and Death" and the Royal Arch, the "Resurrection", and an eminent Masonic writer considers that "the ceremony contains the quintessence of orthodox Masonic philosophy, and is expressive of the highest ideals associated with the intimate search for,

and the ultimate discovery of, Divine Light and Truth.

T. L. Elliott - P. A. G. D. C.    P. P. G. J. (Worcs.)  
P. Z. 3185 and 4621.

September, 1957

Copyright Worcestershire Masonic  
Library and Museum Trust