

MORE LIGHT ON THE ROYAL ARCH

By Comp. Harry Carr, P.G.St.B.

An Address given to Members of the London First Principals' Chapter, No. 2712.

These notes must begin with an apology, because it is fairly certain that some of the points to be made will seem surprising, if not actually rather shocking. I need only add that they will be explained as simply as possible and in the light of the best that is known in modern Masonic scholarship.

The Royal Arch made its first appearance in England during the 1740s. We may assume that the seeds of this new ceremony were germinating for several years before we have records of it, but we cannot date the practice of the Royal Arch earlier than c. 1740.

THE REASONS FOR THE R.A.

If the question is asked, "Why did the Royal Arch appear?", the answer is that a further ceremony, or a separate "Fourth Grade", was inevitable, and this can best be explained by our knowledge of the evolution of the three Craft degrees.

If we go back as far as we dare in English Masonic history to the point where the separate grades or degrees were being evolved, it is almost certain that the first Masonic ceremony was designed for the Fellow or Fellow-craft, i.e., the fully-trained Craftsman.

The system of apprenticeship in England makes its first appearance in the 1200s, and it is fairly safe to assume that the next degree was evolved as an admission ceremony for apprentices.

At this stage, and up to the late 1600s, it is certain that the Craft had no more than two admission ceremonies: one for the Apprentice or Entered Apprentice and the other for the "Fellow-craft or Master". Sooner or later it was inevitable that there would be a demand for a separate ceremony to distinguish the Master from the Fellow-craft; both were equal in their technical capacity, but the Fellow-crafts were employees, and those who were fortunate enough to be able to set up as Masters would quite naturally have wanted a separate degree to themselves.

The third degree appeared in England some time around 1724-1725 and, by 1730, it was already fairly widely known, though not widely practised.

At this stage all three working grades within the Craft were covered by separate ceremonies only one grade remained unrepresented in this fashion. There was still no distinguishing ceremony for the men who had presided in a Lodge, i.e., for the Masters of Lodges, and inevitably a ceremony appeared around 1740.

This is, of course, an over-simplification of the whole story and it represents my own opinions, but they are based entirely on historical foundations and the dates mentioned here are supported by documentary evidence.

THE ORIGINS OF THE R.A. CEREMONY

If we exclude the minor details, the main body of the Royal Arch Ceremony is based upon two separate stories:-

1. The true Biblical story describing the return from Babylon and the building of the Temple.
2. The ancient legend describing the discovery of the Vault, the Altar and the Sacred Word.

The Biblical portion is pure history. (1) The legend, in documentary form, goes back to the early Fathers of the Church. About the year A.D. 400, Philostorgius, writing of the rebuilding of the Temple, gives a recognizable account of the discovery of the Vault, and this appears to be the earliest framework of the legend that has survived. Nine hundred years later, in the fourteenth century, Nicephorus Callistus, in his account of the building of the fourth Temple, enlarged in great detail upon the Philostorgius version. The story is given in such splendid detail that it deserves reproduction word for word:-

"When the foundations were a laying, as I have said, there was a stone among the rest, to which the bottom of the foundation was fastned, that slipt from its place, and discovered the mouth of a cave which had been cut in the rock. Now when they could not see to the bottom by reason of its depth; the Overseers of the building being desirous to have certain knowledge of it they tied a long rope to one of the Labourers, and let him down: He being come to the bottom, found water in it, that took him up to the mid-angles, and searching every part of that hollow place, he found it to be four square, as far as he could conjecture by feeling. Then returning

towards the mouth of it, he hit upon a certain little pillar, not much higher than the water, and lighting with his hand upon it, found a book lying there wrapped up in a piece of thin and clean linnen. Having taken it into his hands, he signified by the rope that they should draw him up. When he was pulled up, he shews the book, which struck them with admiration, especially seeming so fresh and untoucht as it did, being found in so dark and obscure a hole. The Book being unfolded, did amaze not onely the Jews, but the Grecians also, holding forth even at the beginning of it in great Letters ('In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God'). To speak plainly, that Scripture did manifestly contain the whole Gospel, which the Divine tongue of the Virgin-Disciple had declared." (From A.Q.C., vol. Ixix, p. 43.)

I have given here the translation of the original, as it appears in English, in 1659, in a work by Samuel Lee entitled *Orbis Miraculum*. Two points must be noted. First, that our form of the R.A. legend was not an invention or an innovation; it was a pure piece of religious legend going back to the fifth century A.D., and probably even earlier than that.

Secondly, the Holy Book that was discovered in the Vault was not the Old Testament, with our customary words: "In the beginning God created . . ." ; it was the Gospel of St. John, a purely Christian text, and at the time when the Royal Arch first appeared it was a purely Christian degree. To this day, our R.A. ceremonies open with a Christian prayer, and the whole of the work is full of Trinitarian ideas and symbolism, so that, despite its beautiful Old Testament background, a very strong Christian influence still remains.

PLACE OF ORIGIN

It is impossible to say with certainty that the R.A. took its rise in any particular country, but it seems possible that the ceremony came into England from Ireland. Several of the earliest references to the R.A. are undoubtedly Irish, and when the second Grand Lodge, the "Antients", was founded in 1751 it recognized the R.A. as a more-or-less essential adjunct to the normal Craft degrees.

There is, however, another possibility, that the ceremony originated in France, where a great number of Masonic innovations and expansions made their appearance in the early 1740s. In particular, there is an interesting reference in the *Sceau Rompu*, an exposure dated 1745, to a superior class of Masons with a ceremony designed to commemorate the masons who worked "with trowel in hand and sword by their side". Several similar items of evidence support the view that

certain characteristic features of the R.A. ceremony, by whatever name, were already known on the Continent at an early date, but this cannot be taken as proof of origin.

The first Grand Lodge, the "Modems," gave no official recognition or support to the ceremony, although it was practised in several "Modem" Lodges, and it is interesting to notice that although the ceremony was not regarded as an integral part of the three Craft degrees, it was nevertheless worked in ordinary lodges. R.A. Chapters did not yet exist as separate organizations for conferring the new grade, and there was, of course, no supreme controlling authority.

The first Grand and Royal Chapter of the Royal Arch of Jerusalem ("Moderns") was constituted in July, 1767. The "Antients", who had always counted the ceremony as the "root, heart and marrow of Masonry," had not realized the need for a separate controlling body, and their Grand Chapter minutes begin in 1782, after a series of resolutions in their Grand Lodge in December, 1771.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE R.A.

As to the development of the R.A. ceremony, there is every reason to believe that it was designed, originally, for Masters of Lodges or for men who had passed the Chair, and although there is some difference of opinion as to the interpretation of the evidence on this point, there is, in fact, a great deal of valuable evidence to support this view. In 1744, Dr. Fife!d Dassigny published a book with an enormous title, A Serious and Impartial Enquiry into the Cause of the present Decay of Freemasonry in . . . Ireland, and, speaking of the Royal Arch, he described it as ". . . an organis'd body of men who have passed the chair".

Twelve years later, Laurence Dermott, Grand Secretary of the "Antients" Grand Lodge, wrote scornfully of those "... who think themselves Royal Arch Masons without passing the Chair in regular form ... (Ahiman Rezon, 1756, p. 48.) But in those days, when Masonry was not nearly so widespread as it is today, a restriction of this kind - had it really been enforced - would have made the new ceremony almost impossible, because there would never have been enough candidates to keep it alive so, at a very early date, we begin to find evidence of the introduction of a kind of artificial "Chair Degree" in which prospective members of the R.A. were given a sort of imitation Installation in order to qualify them to go on to the R.A.

Minutes for the early period of the R.A. (i.e., c. 1740 to 1760) are exceedingly rare and uninformative, but there is a record of an emergency meeting at Bolton in 1769, at which three men were successively installed as Master, and afterwards the actual Master of the Lodge was re-installed. At Mount Moriah Lodge, now No. 34, London, it was resolved in June, 1785, ". . . that Bro. Phillips shall pass the Chair upon St. John's Day in order to obtain the Supreme Degree of a Royal Arch . . ." At the Philanthropic Lodge, Leeds, now No. 304, the minutes for May, 1795, record that "Bro. Durrans past the chair in order to receive the Royal Arch". Numerous records of a similar character make it evident that a "fictitious passing the chair" ceremony was being widely practised in the second half of the eighteenth century.

When the rival Grand Chapters were united in 1817, the "chair-degree" was officially abolished, but it continued to be worked in many places until the 1850s.

To this day, in many of the American jurisdictions, the entrusting which forms a preliminary to their R.A. is a brief ceremony which contains recognizable elements of our Installation work.

THE RITUAL OF THE R.A.

As to the development of the ritual of the R.A., it is surprising to find that, allowing for inevitable expansions and gradual changes in style and presentation, the essential elements are much the same today as they were in the 1760s. The earliest evidence we have on the subject for that period indicates that the candidate, h ... w ... d, discovered a scroll which was found to contain the opening words of the Gospel of St. John, " In the beginning was the Word . . ." The Sojourners enacted the story of the "Discovery", and the remainder of the ceremony, like the ordinary Craft working of those days, consisted of a Catechism of some 18 to 20 questions and answers. This may be described as the R.A. ritual of the first period.

The second period covers roughly the years 1780 to 1835. In the Craft, this was the period of the greatest stylistic advance in the presentation of the explanatory and symbolical elements of the ritual. In the Royal Arch, the essence of the ceremony remained largely unchanged, but, instead of only 18 to 20 questions in the Catechism, there were now some 80 to 100 questions, with lengthy answers covering much of the material which is given nowadays in the Historical, Symbolical and Mystical Lectures. Much of our present-day material was already there, not as straightforward pieces of recitation, but in the form of Q. and A.

The ineffable Name was not "shared"; the "four-language compound word" was "shared". There were no letters yet on the angles of the T . . . The Triple T . . . did not appear until c. 1820. The R.A. ceremony was in a state of flux, subject to local variations as well as to the ability or limitations of its expounders. The two Grand Chapters apparently made no attempt to disseminate a standard ritual, and it was not until the union of the rivals in 1817 that there arose the possibility of an attempt to introduce a reasonable uniformity of practice.

The first moves towards this end were made in the early 1830s, and a Committee was appointed by Supreme Grand Chapter. The work seems to have been dominated by the Rev. G. A. Browne, sometime Grand Chaplain of the United Grand Lodge, who was singled out at one of the meetings with special thanks for his services. In November, 1834, the ceremonies were rehearsed and approved by Supreme Grand Chapter, and a Chapter of Promulgation was formed in 1835, for six months only, to work as a Chapter of Instruction and, in particular, to ensure uniformity of practice throughout the Order. It demonstrated the newly-approved forms of the Installation and Exaltation ceremonies in a whole series of meetings held from May to August, 1835, and in November, 1835, to avoid misconception, the Grand Chapter ". . . resolved and declared that the ceremonies adopted and promulgated by special Grand Chapter on the 21st and 25th of November, 1834, are the ceremonies of our Order which it is the duty of every Chapter to adopt and obey". DOMATIC, ALDERSGATE, STANDARD and several other versions are all descended from the R.A. ritual of November, 1834.

INNOVATIONS

The changes and innovations that were made at this time may be said to represent the third period in the development of the R.A. ritual, and, rightly or wrongly, it is customary to award praise or blame to the Rev. G. A. Browne for the results of the Committee's labours. He perfected the R.A. Installation ceremonies, which had probably existed for many years before his time, but without any set form of words. He transformed the Catechisms and gave them their new shape as the three Principals' Lectures. He was almost certainly responsible for the introduction of the Letters at the angles of the T . . . with their extraordinary combinations and translations or interpretations. Whoever was responsible for this part of the work, and whatever their motives may have been, the results were lamentable.

In studying the evolution of the ritual, Craft or R.A. (or any other), one must make allowances for evolutionary changes, for the retention of archaisms, and for occasional historical errors and anachronisms. The R.A. ritual exhibits all these

minor defects and it needs no expert eye to notice them. Like an ancient work of architecture which reveals the skill of many hands, in different periods, so that old and new are united in a harmonious whole, the R.A. ritual, over all, is an inspiration. But one small portion of it is open to really serious criticism, viz., the explanation of the Letters at the angles of the T . . . and there is urgent need for revision.

Unfortunately, the defects are not easily recognized because, in this portion of the R.A. ritual, so much depends on a useful working knowledge of Hebrew. In addition to this language barrier, which affects the vast majority of our Brethren, there is also the inherent difficulty of discussing the subject adequately in print.

During this part of the ceremony we are told that every combination of the letters makes a word; that all the words have reference to the Deity or some Divine attribute; that certain Hebrew words (spelt wrongly) have specific meanings; that three pairs of words have particular meanings. Not one of these statements is correct, and some of the explanations that follow are so crude as to be downright offensive.

In an attempt to convey some idea of the faults that mar the ritual at this point, the relevant passages are reproduced here, as they appear in the Domatic working. (Aldersgate and Metropolitan are virtually identical with Domatic in this section. The Oxford working is much shorter at this point and contains fewer errors. It also has a long and interesting Note, which indicates that the compilers were aware of the defects, though apparently powerless to remedy them.)

Text

The characters at the angles of the triangle are of exceeding importance, though it is immaterial where the combination is commenced, as

Comment

Immaterial is nonsense! It is only necessary to glance at the letters to see the absurd results if the combinations are made in the wrong order.

Text

Each has reference to the Deity or some Divine attribute. They are the 1, 2, and 3 of the Hebrew, corresponding to the 1, 2, and 3 of the English alphabet.

Comment

This is simply not true. There are in all twelve possible two-letter and three-letter combinations. Of the twelve, only three make words that could possibly be used for our purpose. The rest are either not words at all, or they mean things which are quite irrelevant.

Text

Take the 1 and the 2; they form 1-2, which is Father.

Comment

Correct. (The only correct statement in the whole piece.)

Text

Take the 2, the 1, and the 3; they form 2-1-3, which is Lord.

Comment

No; this is a childish mis-spelling. The word we use cannot be spelt correctly with these letters. Had it been spelt correctly, it would mean "lord, master, or owner" generally a "human" noun, not a divine one. In that spelling, it would also be the name of a Phoenician (heathen) god; so that our use of the word in this sense is very near to blasphemy.

Text

Take the 1 and the 3; they form 1-3, which is Word.

Comment

It does not mean Word; it means "God," or it means "not".

Text

Take the 3, the 1, and the 2; they form 3-1-2, which signifies Heart or Spirit.

Comment

These three letters do not signify Heart or Spirit. This is another infantile mis-spelling.

Text

Take each combination with the whole, and it will read: - 12/213 = Father Lord.

13/213 = Word Lord.

312/213 = Spirit Lord.

Comment

In this whole set of six words (or three pairs), only the first word is correct. For anyone who understands Hebrew, the rest is awful!

There is a view, not uncommon perhaps, that since the vast majority of the Brethren do not understand the words at all, there is no need to worry about a few trifling points of spelling and interpretation. For those of us who value our Masonry, the answer is simple. The prime justification for the existence of the Craft in its present-day form lies in the quality and importance of its teachings. If any of us happened to hear a school-teacher telling a child that the letters D.O.G. spell "God", we would be justly angry. Yet we allow something almost as bad in this Hebrew portion of the R.A., and it passes without notice, simply because so few of the listeners have any knowledge of the subject.

The lessons that we draw from the letters on the T . . . in this portion of the R.A. ritual are of the utmost importance, because they are designed to crystallize the spiritual meaning of the whole ceremony within a few simple words. We are at fault, both in the "words" themselves and in the "explanations" we give to them, and the following is an earnest attempt to furnish a simple and trustworthy explanation of pure Hebrew words, with an interpretation that is wholly in keeping with the teachings that lie at the very roots of our R.A. ceremonies.

"The characters at the angles of the triangle are of exceeding importance because the three words which we compose from them may be said to epitomize the Teachings of this Supreme Degree.

They are the 1, 2, and 3 of the Hebrew, corresponding to the 1, 2, and 3 of the English alphabet.

The 1 and the 2 together form the word 1-2, which means Father, and reminds us of our close and intimate relation to Him as His children.

The 1 and the 3 together form the word 1-3, which means God. This word, in the original Hebrew, is seldom used by itself, but normally in conjunction with those attributes which may help us to envisage His glory. So, for us, the word 1-3 means God, the Architect, the Almighty Creator, whose mercy and loving kindness are beyond human comprehension.

The 3 and the 2 together form the word 3-2, which means Heart or Spirit, and is used here to remind us of our duty towards Him, whom we are to serve 'with all our

heart and with all our soul and with all our might'. With all our heart, as His children; with all our soul, from a deep conviction of His infinite goodness and power; and with all our might, because our service to Him can never be complete in thought and words alone. Such, my newly exalted Comps., is the explanation we give . . ."

Recently, I addressed an inquiry to the Grand Secretary of the Grand Lodge of Israel, to ascertain what letters are used in this part of the Royal Arch ceremony, as practised nowadays in Israel. I am delighted to report that (out of the twelve possible combinations of letters) they use exactly the same three "two-letter words" that are recommended here, with the interpretations, Father, God and Heart.

It will be observed that the familiar passage, "Father-Lord, Word-Lord." is now omitted, partly because the three letters do not fit that interpretation (and never did). Another reason is because the interpretation is strictly Christian and Trinitarian, and it is, therefore, not in full accord with the official modern views on purely sectarian ritual.

But for those who would wish to retain this passage, I am indebted to E. Comp. R. A. Wells, Scribe E. of Domestic Chapter of Instruction, No. 177, who has produced an admirable and concise version of the earlier forms. It is, of course, understood that the following paragraph bears only an "interpretational" connection with the original three Hebrew letters and their "words": -

In former times these characters in conjunction with the triangle have been explained as - Father Lord, Word Lord, Spirit Lord, according to the teachings of the First Epistle of St. John (chap. 5, v. 7): 'For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father the Word, and the Holy Ghost; and these three are one.' Such, my newly exalted Comp., is the explanation we give of . . ." etc.

FOOTNOTE

The triangle, with Hebrew letters at its corners, had already appeared in alchemical and mystical studies long before its introduction into the Royal Arch. Details are given here of two interesting examples, but, in both cases, it has proved impossible to ascertain the purpose for which they were used or how they were interpreted, and there is no certainty that the letters used in them were the same as those commonly used in the R.A.

1. In the Ashmolean MS. No. 1395 (Bodleian Lib.), a text associated with William Backhouse, (1) an alchemist and Rosicrucian philosopher, whom Ashmole revered as a father, p. 223 of the MS. (in an unidentified hand) finishes with the words "Hallelu Jah", and a triangle containing within its angles the Hebrew letters Aleph = A, Beth = B, and Lamed = L. (See Ambix, Journal of the Society for the Study of Alchemy and Early Chemistry, Dec., 1949, p. 32.) There is no textual indication as to the meaning of this diagram, and although the learned author of the paper names the three Hebrew letters, photographs of the original MS. suggest that the second and, perhaps, the third letters are extremely doubtful.

2. The title-page to George Smith's *The Use and Abuse of Free-Masonry*, 1783, contain a design of three interlaced circles, with a triangle ruled at their intersections, and the Hebrew letters Aleph, Chaf = Ch, and Lamed drawn at the corners. Unfortunately, the author omitted to explain the design or to interpret the letters, nor does he say where he obtained it, and it is now impossible to say whether the second letter is genuinely a "Chaf" or an ill-drawn Beth.

(1) It should be noted, however, that the English R.A. "Historical Lecture" contains several anachronisms.