

Why the Most Excellent Master Degree?

The Most Excellent Master degree is commonly considered to be a strictly American invention to complete the story begun in the Blue Lodge degrees. And so it does. We were left somewhat hanging at the end of the Master Mason Degree. In this Order, we learn of the completion and dedication of the Temple. The degree is not an initiation or an advancement *per se* -- at face value it is a "pageant."¹

Or maybe not. It is unlikely that this degree exists purely for entertainment value or merely to wrap up some loose ends. Maybe amidst the fanfare and processions there are everyday lessons to learn or ideas to employ. This paper navigates through the degree and re-examines the idea that it exists merely to complete the story line and tries to find some actionable lessons.

To begin, let's put our degrees in the order as they might logically occur, instead of the order in which we received them:

1. The Entered Apprentice degree is first of course, followed by
2. the Fellow Craft degree.
3. The Mark Master degree seems to come next, the Temple is still under construction and we represent Fellow Crafts participating in the work; the Fellow Craft and Mark Master degrees seem to fit together coherently.
4. The Past Master degree *occurs* next, its placement will be reconsidered later.
5. Reasonable minds can disagree, but the Select Master might be next. Our operative Grand Master still lives and activities occur which suggest the Temple is nearly completed and
6. next we might place the Royal Master, simply because the circumambulation scene with Hiram Abiff is so fatalist and solemn that it seems to foreshadow his imminent demise;
7. that demise occurs next in the Master Mason degree.
8. The Temple is not completed in that degree, so we insert the Most Excellent Master to complete and commemorate it.
9. The Super Excellent Master degree seems to come next – it describes the destruction of the Temple and the beginning of the Babylonian captivity.
10. The Illustrious Order of the Red Cross might come next. It depicts events between the time of the two Temples.
11. Next comes the Royal Arch. It captures and summarizes a lot of the events of the previous degrees and brings us to the point at which construction of the 2nd Temple commences.
12. We then fast forward many centuries to the Mediterranean Pass and Order of the Malta and finally
13. conclude with the Order of Temple.

Reviewing our degrees in chronological order might start us thinking about at least four things.

First, the virtual Past Master degree seems entirely out of place. It tells no story and refers to little in the Biblical narrative. As a historical prerequisite to the Royal Arch, it probably makes more sense to have it *follow* the Most Excellent Master and the completion of the Temple, as will be argued later.

Second, if we omit the Most Excellent Master Degree, we indeed have a big gap in our Masonic storyline. We would jump from the death of our Grand Master, prior to the 1st Temple's completion all the way to the time work is begun on the Second. Up to now our storyline has been compact. Without the Most Excellent Master degree, we indeed have a big gap.

Third, we *still* have big gaps in our story. For example, when and how was Hiram Abiff's successor selected? We get a hint of an answer in the Royal Master degree, but it is very cursory.

And although York Rite's Orders take us from the burning bush to the crucifixion of the Nazarene, we have no degree about the 2nd Temple's construction, completion or destruction. We have a degree mentioning the invasion of Judah by the Lydians, but no mention of Judah coming under the thumb of the Romans or much later that of the Persians and Arabs. Even *with* the Most Excellent Master Degree, there are still really big gaps in our story.

Perhaps there is something more to this degree than pageantry.

Which bring us to a fourth thought. It is this -- although the allegory of Freemasonry is clearly based on the Biblical narrative, it is not intended to teach Biblical history. If we doubt that proposition, we need only remember that in the Volume of Sacred Law, our operative Grand Master completes his work at the Temple and returns home. There was no scene at the east gate.

The History

So why do we have the Most Excellent Master Degree?

George Steinmetz suggests it was indeed created to fill in a gap in our story. Its primary reason for existence is "...to bring to the candidate the story of the completion and dedication of the Temple of Solomon and it attempts to fill the gap in the Masonic legend which would otherwise remain..."²

The Degree is entirely of American origin and bears no correlation to similarly-named Work conferred in Europe.³ The sequence of degrees worked in the "Ancients" Lodges in Liverpool from 1792 until 1822, referred to as the Excellent Master is something else⁴. The Irish work prior to 1786 appears to have originated with the Ancients⁵ and is also different Work.

Our American degree "...is said to have originated in Temple Chapter, Albany, New York about 1797. Thomas Webb is generally credited with having been its author."⁶

The Narrative

The first section opens the Lodge. If we attended this degree with no prior knowledge of its subject, it would seem quite familiar to us, with one important difference. The station in the South is empty. Hiram Abiff is dead and no one has filled his station.

This is the first clue that the Degree might exist for some reason *other* than just to fill in a gap in our Masonic story. Because the gap is still there. How was the Temple completed, at least allegorically, without the third great pillar? The empty station in the South is an unfilled gap.

The second clue is a remark by the Senior Deacon when standing with the Candidate in front of the empty Junior Warden's station, "May we be reminded of the shortness of life and the uncertainty of its continuance, remembering that soon, when our brethren shall assemble to labor, our station will also be vacant forever."⁷ Here, like the second section of the Master's degree, is another admonition to consider our mortality.

The second section of the degree depicts the completion of the Temple. We ceremonially place the "copestone" or "capstone" onto the Temple. We use this word, instead of keystone, because they are not the same thing.

Let's digress briefly to consider cornerstones, keystones and capstones.

Cornerstone. A structure is erected upon a Cornerstone. The cornerstone must be solid and perfectly squared to support an edifice. It is the fitting symbol for the Entered Apprentice degree. Wisdom and enlightenment, of necessity, must be based on a solid foundation. The cornerstone's four sides might remind us of the four cardinal virtues inculcated in the First Degree's Lecture. Its base might represent a belief in and devotion to Deity, without which the four sides might be irrelevant. The cornerstone's top focuses attention on the "structure" that is to be erected.

Keystone. In an operative sense, the keystone is a "wedge-shaped centre-stone which crowns and completes [an] arch and forms an absolutely essential part of it. Without this keystone the arch would collapse...[it] functions independently of any mortar or cement and transmits a load evenly through the other stones to vertical supports..."⁸ Necessarily, there will be as many keystones in a structure as the number of arches.⁹

Speculatively, the keystone might allude to those virtues, those additional qualities we must acquire and develop to achieve an enlightened life. The keystone of the Mark Master Degree, might coincide with the development of the human senses and seven liberal arts and sciences of the Fellow Craft Degree; the two degrees we associated with each other earlier.

Copystone.¹⁰ The copestone or capstone, operatively, is the final and highest stone in a structure.¹¹ It serves no specific engineering or structural purpose. There is only one copestone in a structure¹² and its placement is of a celebratory nature. It

denotes completion. Symbolically, it indicates a level of achievement and an attainment of some “highest level” of wisdom or competency.

So the ceremony of placing the copestone in the Most Excellent Master degree does more than fill in a gap in our masonic story – it points us back to symbols in previous degrees. It is instructional. It reminds us that we must begin from a solid foundation, some cornerstone of belief in Deity. To support progress, knowledge must be obtained, abilities developed, virtue practiced. The keystone represents this process. Finally, the copestone represents that level of proficiency at which we can begin to apply ourselves for the betterment of humanity.

Okay, so back to the degree. In the second scene of the second section, we dedicate the Temple. We proceed through the Courtyard of the Temple where the Altar of Sacrifice is located. This may allude to the ground floor where Entered Apprentices work. We pass by the Incense Altar, which may allude to the Middle Chamber. Finally, we arrive at the Sanctum Sanctorum or Holy of Holies and deposit the seven-branched lamp, shew-bread and the Ark of the Covenant.¹³

Something important happens now. We take off our aprons. Our work is complete. Our labor is finished.

In the final scene of the second section, we implore the blessing of Deity and endeavor to imagine how such a blessing might be bestowed. Notably, it involves fire, the ancient element described by the alchemists as the transforming element.

The Lessons

So what do we learn from this degree? Here are a couple of ideas:

The first is the recognition that our lives constantly change and we must adapt. As Most Excellent Masters our instant task is completed. We take our aprons off. Having labored successfully to complete a temporal structure we must pursue another career, because we are now unemployed. Thanks a lot, Solomon.

Life forces us to change and adapt.¹⁴ The Degree reminds us that life is a series of “temple-buildings.” Although we have laid down our aprons, we must take them back up for another endeavor.

Secondly, life is full of unachieved aspirations. Although the Temple is completed, we still have not achieved a primary objective, the recovery of the Lost Word. Although honored and recognized, admission into the Sanctuary or Holy of Holies has not been permitted. We might have done good work, square work, but our desired experience - a oneness with Deity – is still beyond our grasp.

Thirdly, in pursuing all our dreams and goals and in dealing with life-changing-events, the Degree reinforces that not until Death, when *our* copestone is in position, might our aspirations be fulfilled. Our life’s work survives the grave and extends into that “spiritual house not made with hands.” As the ritual tells us, our wages might not be received in this life.¹⁵

Finally, remember that we are not “initiated” into anything in the Most Excellent Master Degree. We have proven our skill and ability in the quarries and demonstrated faithfulness and fidelity to the Craft. This degree recognizes and acknowledges that proficiency.

But what do we do now? What do we do as a result of this degree?

This degree represents a transition, let us say, one of those life changing events. We transition from laboring and learning to teaching and sharing. The Charge of the degree establishes the clear expectation that a Most Excellent Master is to be “completely conversant” with this and all *preceding* degrees.¹⁶ Since “there is no greater gift man can give his fellow man than knowledge,”¹⁷ as Most Excellent Masters, we are to be dispensers of knowledge, we are to be instructors, teachers and mentors.

We can therefore conclude that this degree does not exist just to fill in a gap in the story line – it is *a call to action*. It marks our transition from student to teacher, from Apprentice to Master, from follower to leader. The Degree implores us to go forth to teach, instruct and lead.

It seems that this degree is telling us that we are now capable of leadership, that we might be good candidates to become of the Master of a Lodge. For this reason, it seems like it should precede the Past Master degree, not follow it.

Let us conclude the examination of the Degree with the recognition that the Temple could not be dedicated until it was completed. Human life is, perhaps, reversed – it can not be completed until is dedicated.

Perhaps the final lesson gleaned from the Most Excellent Master Degree is that we should continually dedicate our lives to fulfilling our duties, to self-improvement, to the spreading and sharing of knowledge, the practice of charity and exemplary conduct. With such dedication, someday, in this life or the next, *our* work will be complete.

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¹ George H. Steinmetz, *The Royal Arch – Its Hidden Meaning*, Macoy, 1946, p 58.

² ----- p 59, 63.

³ Reverend Jan L. Baderstadt, PGHP, KYCH, OPC *Lost in the Shuffle, A Look at the Past Master and Most Excellent Master Degrees in York Rite Freemasonry*, Coffee Time Press, 2002, p 25.

⁴ Bernard E. Jones, *Freemasons’ Book of the Royal Arch*, Harrap & Co, 1980, p 203.

⁵ -----, p 211.

⁶ Steinmetz, p 59. Charles C. Hunt PGHP, *Lessons in Capitular Masonry*, General Grand Chapter, R.A.M., International 1971, Part I, p 17.

⁷ General Grand Chapter, R.A.M., International, Fiftieth Edition, 1969 (cited as “Ritual”), p 63.

⁸ Jones, p 525-6, ellipses added.

⁹ Hunt, Part III, p 20.

¹⁰ Various literature consulted disagreed on whether the word is “capestone” or “copedstone.”

¹¹ Albert G. Mackey, *Book of the Chapter (or Monitorial Instructions in the degrees of Mark, Past and Most Excellent Master of the Royal Arch)*, Clark & Maynard, Fourth Edition, 1858, p 79.

¹² Hunt, Part III, p 21.

¹³ Descriptions are taken partly from the Ritual and partly from a paper by Jeff Day, PEHP in a paper dated December 26, 2008 found on the internet.

¹⁴ Baderstadt, p 43.

¹⁵ Ritual, p 80.

¹⁶ Mackey, p 88, emphasis added.

¹⁷ Steinmetz, p 63. Ritual, p 80.