

# Mining the Quarries: The Degree of Mark Master

**By: Companion Christopher S. Tripp**

Fredericksburg Royal Arch Chapter No. 23  
Inquisitors of Solomon AMD Council No. 364

The goal of this paper is to briefly draw your attention to some of the symbolism and teachings of the Mark Master Degree. We are accustomed to putting on the Degrees with no small amount of skill and pride, but our Degrees contain a great deal of Masonic philosophy—and in the early Degrees, mainly moral philosophy—that is easily glossed over on our way to the Holy Royal Arch. Let us take a few moments to dilate briefly upon this ancient and most significant Degree.

There are two reasons it is fruitful to consider this—First, because the Masonic Light we offer in the Chapter builds on the firm foundation laid in the Blue Lodge; and Secondly, because these Degrees complete and illuminate several aspects of our Symbolic Craft Degrees.

\*\*\*

The Mark Master Degree is commonly understood as being the completion of the Fellowcraft Degree, just as the Royal Arch Degree is the completion of the Master Mason Degree. Consider, for example, that the Fellowcrafts in the Master Mason's Degree, as well as King Hiram, are there addressed as *Companion*. While they are referred to as *Brother* in a Lodge of Mark Masters, and they are not referred to again as *Companions* until the Royal Arch Degree, Mackey states that *Companion* represents a more intimate tie than *Brother*, in that all men are by nature *Brothers*, but not all are our Companions. Further, in French Masonry, the Degree of Fellowcraft is known as the *Grade du Compagnon*.<sup>1</sup> This underscores the natural progression of the Degrees from the Lodge to the Chapter.

\*\*\*

There are many profound moral lessons of this Degree, but let us focus on the Overseers and their examination of the Keystone.

First, to the object of their examination. The Keystone is such an important symbol that it bears the same meaning in the Chapter Degrees as the Square and Compasses in the Symbolic Lodge.<sup>2</sup> As the uppermost stone in an arch, its unique shape brings strength and stability to the structure. While it has been commonly said that the arch is an innovation unknown at the time of the building of King Solomon's Temple, Mackey disputes this, citing the discovery of arches in ancient Thebes and Tyre many centuries earlier.<sup>3</sup> Regardless, the globes on the two columns of the Temple remain powerful symbols that convey important truths, even if they are anachronisms.

Arches efficiently distribute the stresses due to the weight of the higher stones in a structure around doors and windows. Thus, their invention permitted more doors and windows to be built in load-

---

<sup>1</sup> Albert G. Mackey, *An Encyclopædia of Freemasonry and its Kindred Sciences*, entries *Companion* and *Compagnon*.

<sup>2</sup> Jeremy Utt, *An Explanation of the History, Symbolism, and Meaning of the Mark Master Degree*, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Mackey, op. cit., entry *Keystone* and *Arch*, *Antiquity of the*.

bearing walls, admitting more light into the building's interior.<sup>4</sup> From a practical standpoint, this was important in an era when the only artificial lights was from lamps and candles. From a spiritual standpoint, the significance of letting more light into the Temple is rather obvious.

The Keystone required specialized knowledge and skill. Therefore, it was designed by the Master Craftsman himself. The Overseers, in their ignorance, and not possessing the Master's Word, did not appreciate it for what it was. Moreover, the form of the Keystone consists of two non-parallel and non-perpendicular lines, and arcs of two concentric circles. Its shape, as well as the circular mark, cannot be formed using the Working Tools available to a Fellowcraft—the Gauge and Square; it requires the use of the Compasses as well.<sup>5</sup> Though not enumerated as such in the Ritual of the Craft Degrees, there is no doubt in my mind that the Compasses are among the Working Tools of a Master Mason. Their meaning as representing the spiritual aspect of Man and Creation, juxtaposed with the Square, denoting the physical aspect, or celestial vs. terrestrial, or Speculative vs. Operative Masonry, is significant for construction of the Keystone. The rules of morality taught in the Craft Degrees are sufficient for construction of our Temple in Blue Lodge Masonry, but we need to go beyond them and learn a more sublime philosophy to complete the work of the Chapter.

\*\*\*

With regard to the Overseers themselves, note that on the earlier Degrees of Masonry, it is the individual Brother who is subjected to three examinations; here—he having been accepted among the workmen—it is his work. This teaches us that we're known by our work. If we do good work, it reflects well on us. If we do shoddy work, it reflects poorly. We leave our mark on everything we do. Like the stones of our Temple, our work survives us.

The Overseers, not recognizing the significance of the Keystone, ultimately reject it. But note that the first two Overseers at first are willing to let it pass on rather than take an uncomfortable moral stand. Are we ever guilty of passing the buck rather than confronting an uncomfortable issue? *It's far easier to let the Master Overseer deal with the problem*, we tell ourselves; *he'll know what to do*. So what if our work isn't exactly square? What does it matter if we cut corners? What's the harm in relaxing our standards this once?

Rejecting the stone turned out to be the wrong decision, but notice that when challenged on their earlier decision, they backed down, and eventually they all concurred in making this mistake. Yes, even in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, peer pressure was a thing. The Overseers had their Squares—the symbol of an unambiguous moral standard—but lacked the conviction to use them. They let the Keystone pass—the right decision, for the wrong reason—and then went along with rejecting it—the wrong decision, but again for the wrong reason. Let us not be guilty of passing the buck or going along with the crowd. Let us do the right thing for the right reason.

Rejection of the Keystone has a further significance, indicated by the various Scriptures recited (Psalms 118:22, Matthew 21:42, Mark 12:10, and Luke 20:17)—*The stone which the builders rejected is become the head of the corner.*<sup>6</sup> Matthew Henry's Commentary on Psalms 118, quoted

---

<sup>4</sup> C.M. Harl, *The Keystone's Meaning*, Grand Royal Arch Chapter Short Talk Program, 1887.

<sup>5</sup> Piers A. Vaughan, *Capitular Development Course*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., Grand Chapter of New York, 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Albert G. Mackey, *Book of the Chapter*, 4<sup>th</sup> Ed., 1870, Book I, Mark Master.

in the Synoptic Gospels, states that this passage is an allusion both to King David, who was rejected by Saul and his courtiers before he became King, and to Jesus' humiliation and exaltation.<sup>7</sup>

\*\*\*

There are many more moral lessons in this often-overlooked Degree, which we must pass over for the sake of brevity. For example, the Scripture to which the Bible is open on this Degree, Matthew XX, is the Parable of the Vineyard. This is often misunderstood as saying that we should all get the same wages regardless of effort—a most un-Masonic idea. In my view, it teaches the exact opposite—that we should be content with the wages we've agreed to, and Masons should not envy one another, 'promoting each other's welfare, and rejoicing in each other's prosperity.'

## **REFERENCES**

*The following references were drawn from the Educational Programs & Materials on the website of the Grand Chapter, Royal Arch Masons of Virginia:*

Jeremy Utt, *An Explanation of the History, Symbolism, and Meaning of the Mark Master Degree*, Virginia Research Royal Arch Chapter No. 1753 (2015).

C.M. Harl, *The Keystone's Meaning*, Grand Royal Arch Chapter Short Talk Program (1887).

Donald L. McAndrews, *The Mark Master: Additional Information for the Inquiring Fellowcraft*, Virginia Masonic Herald, February 2010.

### *Additional References:*

Albert G. Mackey, *An Encyclopædia of Freemasonry and its Kindred Sciences Comprising the Whole Range of Arts, Sciences and Literature as Connected with the Institution*, The Masonic History Company, New York and London (1914).

Albert G. Mackey, *Book of the Chapter or Monitorial Instructions, in the Degrees of Mark, Past and Most Excellent Master and the Holy Royal Arch*, 4<sup>th</sup> Ed., Clark & Maynard, New York (1870).

Piers A. Vaughn, *Capitular Development Course: A Modern Monitor*, Grand Chapter, State of New York, Royal Arch Masons, Rose Circle Publications (2017).

Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, multiple editions (public domain, 1706).

---

<sup>7</sup> Matthew Henry wrote his Commentary in 1706, so this would have been known around the time these Degrees were being worked, the first recorded instance of the Mark Master Degree from 1769 (Utt).