

ROYAL ARCH CHAPTER BANNERS

Edited by RE Mark S Chapman, DDGHP18

One thing that many Royal Arch Masons might find in their storage closet might be a set of props for conducting the Royal Arch Degree, containing four banners of the four tribes of Israel as taught in the Old Testament and perpetuated through tradition. In today's degree work, these banners are likely to be replaced altogether with 4 veils (curtains).

Before the year 1900, use of these four banners of the tribes of Israel were in conjunction with the four veils of the Tabernacle and/or the stations of the masters of the veils. These banners are positioned at the stations of the veils during Chapter meetings... and BTW are still in use in Grand Chapter of Ireland that Mark visited several years ago. So, what do these four banners represent and why did our founders see them as significant to the lessons taught in Royal Arch Masonry?

Royal Arch Chapter Room in Grand Lodge of Ireland



Few researchers have produced information on the Twelve Tribes whose banners we use in the Royal Arch Degree. These tribes play a very big part in many of the degrees of our order. The tribal life also played a large part in the life of the Israelites and their history is closely interwoven with our ritual. Therefore, some knowledge of their history, customs, and practices must give us all a better understanding of our ritual and how it fits within the framework of Capitular Masonry.

The four banners displayed in the Keystone RAC58 RA Deg painting is referred to only as passing reference to the tribes in the lectures of our degrees. Some writers construe the arrangements of our chapter rooms as the camping order of the Israelites. Thus, the banners represent the tribes, and the altar represents the Ark of the Covenant. Because Jacob had twelve sons it is often, but erroneously, assumed that the twelve tribes of Israel were named after his sons. This is incorrect. Ten of the Tribes were named after the sons of Jacob's wives, but two were named after two of his grandsons. Ephraim and Manasseh were the sons of Joseph. Joseph had no tribe named after him! (But Joseph is in our MM Deg ritual when the roll of the Craft is called. BTW: Levi is also called in our MM Deg ritual but not one of the 12 tribes)

Levi and his descendants were directed to serve the other tribes as priests, and were scattered among the other tribes. The Levites were also responsible for transporting the Ark of the Covenant and all the coverings and equipment. Simeon, however, appears to have received similar benefits as the other brothers. Instead of a territory he was given nineteen unconnected cities, located within the territory allocated to Judah.

Joseph, who was probably the favorite son because of feeding his family while they were in Egypt, was honored by having his sons Ephraim and Manasseh partake of Jacob's blessing. Thus, the twelve tribes originated from the ten sons and two Grandsons of the Patriarch Jacob. On his deathbed the sons of Jacob received what has become known as "Jacob's Blessing", although in some cases it was more of a curse (Genesis 49). Jacob's two Grandsons received a blessing from Moses (Deuteronomy 32, 33). The actual blessings become important because they are the basis of the images (signs) shown on the banners.

The positions occupied by the Tribes when on their march and when they camped were designed to protect the Ark of the Covenant at all times. "Every man of the children of Israel shall pitch by his own standard, with the sign of his father's house; far off about the tabernacle of the congregation shall they pitch" (Numbers 2:2).

In the East were Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun.

In the South were Reuben, Simeon, and Gad.

In the West were Ephraim, Manasseh, and Benjamin.

In the North were Dan, Asher, and Naptholi."

Looking at these names in the Bible and at the banners in a chapter room most in use in England, Ireland and Scotland, they appear to be very neat, compact and a comfortable size. However, if these names are translated into people, it becomes a vastly different picture. According to the 2nd Chapter of Numbers, a census was taken of all male members of the tribes over 20 years of age and suitable as warriors.

This was an army of more than half a million men, and to these must be added the men who were not fit for the army, along with the women and children, so the aggregate must be well over a million people. Additionally, there would have been sheep, goats and cattle to accompany them. The logistics of their moving or even camping must have been tremendous.

Now we come to the banners' signs and standards. There is mention in the Bible of banners and signs, but there is no reference to their colors and the devices that adorned them. There would have to be some means of distinguishing the various tribes so that the members would know where to camp or where to march. The descriptions and coloring of the banners has been added by our Masonic forbearers and variations now become visible.

The four principal banners represented in my painting of the Royal Arch Degree are the Standards of the four lead divisions of the army of Israel. They bear the symbols of a Man, a Lion, an Ox, and an Eagle. These symbols or devices are derived from two of the most prophetic and mystical books of the Holy Bible, namely Ezekiel and Revelation. In these books of Holy Scripture, The Lion on white background represents (East) the Tribe of Judah; the Man on purple background (South) that of Reuben; the Ox on red background represents West)

the tribe of Ephraim; and the Eagle on blue background (North) represents the tribe of Dan.



The left panel of the Royal Arch degree oil painting in the Keystone RAC #58 by RE Mark S Chapman

When painting the RA degree painting, Mark chose banners vs. veils because the veils would only have been installed while the rebuilding of the temple was near completion not during the early phase of construction as shown in the painting. Hence in the painting, the banners represent each of the 4 veils.

The Lion represents strength and power, the Ox symbolizes patience and great care or attention to detail, the Man gives reference to those most human of qualities: intelligence and understanding, while the Eagle represents promptness and quickness in action. The Book of Revelation depicts the Emblems as four distinct beings.

These signs arranged around the Altar are said to commemorate the Children of Israel during their forty years of travel in the wilderness as lead by Moses and Aaron. Tradition holds that in the course of which the banners were regularly set up, and the Tribes assembled and pitched their tents around their own individual banner.

So if there were twelve tribes, why did the Royal Arch Masonry ritual only chose to incorporate four? The answer lies in a couple of contributing factors. One factor is Biblically based, in how the twelve tribes governed themselves under Moses. In their positions of encampment, these twelve tribes were divided into four larger groups of three tribes each. Each tribe was divinely situated at a certain distance around the tabernacle. The four governing tribes of the four groups Judah, Reuben, Ephraim and Dan were recognized as tribal leaders. Thus, just like the arrangement of a Blue Lodge in the tradition of the Tabernacle and Solomon's Temple, the Masonic use and custom of the placement of Jewish tribal banners near the altar associated with the veils of Zerubbabel's tabernacle have a distinct symbolism. Beside the Biblical background, the principal factor involved is medieval chivalry and its use of banners. The Banners come into Freemasonry from exposure to them in church as well as high civic settings. Banners hold great significance when displayed in the chapels or in the meeting of certain Orders of Knighthood.

Judah took a place of prominence by occupying the greatest area and being on the eastern side facing the tabernacle entrance behind the tents of Aaron. To their right was the tribe of Issachar and on the other side Zebulun on the east numbering 186,400 men. Reuben (with Simeon and Gad) was stationed in the

south numbering 151,450 men. The West was occupied by the offspring from Jacob's wife Rachel, that of Ephraim (with Manasseh and Benjamin), numbering 108,100 men. On the north side was Dan (with Asher and Naphtali) numbering 157,600 men. This brought the total count of men twenty years and upwards to 603,550, not including the tribe of Levi. (There were 22,300 male Levites aged one month or more, 8,580 of whom were required to transport the Ark and its related equipment.)

The Masonic connection in this positioning is as follows: The tribes stationed in the East, West, and South were: Judah, the prophesied tribe of the Messiah-promised future leader (Worshipful Master), Ephraim, Jacob's grandson by Joseph his favorite (Senior Warden), and Reuben, first born of Jacob (Junior Warden). In the ultimate symbolism by Divine command, the Tabernacle itself was always found in the very center of the camp with the tents of the various tribes set up at a certain distance. This is to teach us that we should keep our worship and reverence for God central in our lives while protecting or surrounding it by like an army of thousands (Numbers 2:2).



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