

An Appreciation of the Royal Arch Chapter Opening Ritual and its Meaning

Prepared for and presented at the July 2019 District 1 Royal Arch Chapter Convocations by District Education Officer, Excellent Companion Jim Landerkin

I have been considered a pretty good ritualist in the different Masonic organizations to which I have belonged. I have squared my corners, carried my staff at the proper angle and have memorized and regurgitated lengthy passages of catechisms and lectures. I was trained early on that being a good Mason meant knowing the correct responses and physical movements for the various positions in Lodge and Chapter. It was similar to learning and executing formation marching in the military, and to the correct hand and foot movements in martial arts.

I learned how to do these things, but not why they were done in a certain way. I learned the How, but not the Why. As with most Freemasonry, the Why is something that every Mason is to discover for himself by thinking about the allegories and symbology and applying that thinking to his everyday life in order to become a living stone characterized by good work, square work, just such work as is needed for the celestial temple.

I truly appreciate the way we open our Royal Arch Chapter. It is a most beautiful sequence of events that is designed to establish the roles and responsibilities of the individual officers of the Chapter. There is much to relate about this ritual, but in this talk, I want to concentrate on the Veils, not only to their significance in opening the Chapter, but also to their importance in the Royal Arch Degree.

These veils have their genesis in the construction of the Tabernacle built under the direction of Moses at Sinai according to the pattern given to him by God in a special revelation. In Exodus 27:16 it is written:

“... And for the gate of the court shall be a hanging of twenty cubits, of blue, and purple, and scarlet, and fine twined linen, wrought with needlework; and their pillars shall be of silver, and their sockets of brass”

In the current Royal Arch Chapter opening ritual, we progress through a series of explanations of how a Royal Arch Mason may pass through the several veils and

enter the Sanctuary or Holy of Holies. In the Tabernacle and in King Solomon's Temple, only the High Priest was allowed, once a year (on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement), to enter the Holy of Holies to commune with the presence of God. It is also written that at the occurrence of Jesus' crucifixion, the massive veil that separated the outer courts of the Temple from the Holy of Holies was rent in twain, thereby removing that which separated the presence of God from His people. (Matthew 27:51)

In our modern ritual, we use four veils to delineate the progression from the Blue Lodge to the conferral of the Most Sublime Degree of the Holy Royal Arch.

The first veil being blue denotes Friendship and reminds us that we all came from a "Blue Lodge" where we were first introduced to the tenets of Freemasonry.

The second veil, being purple, is the natural result of combining the blue color of the first veil (representing Ancient Craft Masonry) with the scarlet color of the third veil (representing Royal Arch Masonry), and denotes the developing Union of what we learned in the Blue Lodge with what we are learning in the Holy Royal Arch degree conferrals, and that an intimate connection should always and ever exist between the two bodies. Indeed, the Royal Arch was, for many years, part of the Blue Lodge degrees.

The third veil, colored scarlet, denotes that fervency and zeal which should actuate all Royal Arch Masons, now that they have learned more about the genesis of Freemasonry than they were exposed to in the Blue Lodge.

The fourth veil, colored white, denotes the purity of heart and rectitude of conduct that must characterize all who would gain access to the Sanctum Sanctorum or Holy of Holies.

The veils also allude to the banners borne through the wilderness by the four principal tribes of the children of Israel, to wit: Judah, Reuben, Ephraim, and Dan, emblematically representing the strength of the lion, the intelligence of man, the patience of the ox, and the swiftness of the eagle. The arrangement of the banners corresponds with the order of precedence of the principle tribes as recorded in the 2nd and 10th chapters of the Book of Numbers.

I truly admire the creation of this ritual in that it confirms the importance of our initial entrance into Freemasonry at the Blue Lodge, with the increased opportunity to understand the roots and messages of our gentle craft.

But wait ... There's more. More meaning to this opening ritual than just that "intimate connection" with the Blue Lodge, and it relates to how we move from veil to veil, by the use of passwords that relate to God's identity and people involved with three noted Arks.

We have satisfied the guardian of the First Veil with the "regular pass" of IATIM, the name that God gave to Moses from out of the burning bush on Mt. Horeb as written at Exodus 3:14.

Arriving at the Second Veil, we satisfy its guardian with the proper passwords of S..., H.. and J..... . These are the names of Noah's sons who built the Ark of Safety that carried Noah and his family and two of each creature to save them from the flood in order to repopulate the Earth.

At the Third Veil, we provide its guardian with the proper passwords of M..., A....., and B..... . These are the men who followed God's instructions in building the Ark of the Covenant (as written in Exodus 25:10-21), which would be a sanctuary where God presence may dwell among His people. This Ark is also referred to as the Ark of Moses or the Ark of the Testimony.

As we approach the Fourth Veil, we satisfy the Royal Arch Captain by providing the Signet which was provided by the guardian of the Third Veil, and refers to Truth, which is Zerubbabel.

"Truth" seems to be associated with Zerubbabel based on a story in the non-canonical (for most religions) or Apocryphal Book of 1st Esdras and relates to Zerubbabel winning a contest wherein he posited that Truth conquers all. In winning that contest, King Darius granted Zerubbabel's wish to have the King support the rebuilding of the Temple, which would include an Ark that would hold the Temple vessels that were then in the custody of King Darius.

This third Ark, called the Substitute Ark, is therefore associated with Zerubbabel. The Substitute Ark is a chest or coffer that was created as a true copy of the Ark of the Covenant which was lost when the first Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 B.C.

It is a copy of this Substitute Ark that Royal Arch Degree Candidates find in their labors and in which the High Priest finds a Pot of Manna, an imitation of Aaron's Rod, a true copy of the Book of the Law and a Key which is used to decipher the "mysterious characters on the top and sides of the Ark," including the long-lost ancient Master's word, now referred to as the Grand Omnific Royal Arch Word, thus fulfilling the prophesy "until future generations shall find out the right."

So, my Companions, we find if we but seek, layers upon layers of meaning within the bare bones of our rituals. It is all well and good that we become proficient in our ritual, but unless we understand what the ritual is based upon, they are just statements to be parroted when opening the Chapter or conferring a degree. We as Royal Arch Masons should always dig deep to find hidden references and meanings in all of our ritual work.