

\* Please note that any opinions expressed in these lectures are those of the individual writers and may not necessarily reflect the views of the Province or Supreme Grand Chapter.

## **Lecture 5    The Ensigns on the Staves**

For the purpose of illustrating this talk more effectively, the Ensigns have been re-arranged as follows:  
(East 1 Judah; 2 Issachar; 3 Zebulon)    (South 6 Gad ; 5 Simeon; 4 Reuben)  
(West 9 Benjamin: 8 Manasseh; 7 Ephraim)    (North 12 Naphtali; 11 Asher; 10 Dan)

*This lecture has been compiled from various sources mainly from papers by E.Comp. the Rev'd G.A. Browne, Grand Superintendent for Cambridge in 1810, E.Comp. Arthur Wilkins P3rdPrGPrin (Wilts) and E.Comp. Adrian Jones PPrGSN of the Province of Somerset and of course the V.S.L.*

We are very fortunate indeed that in the Royal Arch Degree, we have such a delightful and interesting Exaltation ceremony that almost without fail, impresses and inspires the Candidate. This is usually followed by the Historical Lecture which contains very interesting data and chronicles some of the various happenings to the Children of Israel.

We also have that glorious piece of ritual, the Mystical Lecture, which is a great challenge to the Aspiring ritualist, and in its detailed explanation is a source of wonder to the Candidate, and in between is the Symbolical Lecture which explains some of the form, symbols, ornaments and furniture of the Chapter, but it does not enlighten us to any great extent regarding the "Ensigns on the Staves" around which we sit in our Royal Arch Chapters.

I would point out that Lectures referred to are those in use prior to December 2004 and probably still are, in some Chapters. As far as can be ascertained from old records and writings Banners or Ensigns were introduced into the Royal Arch Degree around the mid 1700's, and most certainly not as we see them in the majority of our Chapters today.

Tribal designs in the first instance were painted on metal or tin and shaped in several ways. Some were in the form of a Shield and some in the form of a broad blade of a spear and mounted on Staves or Poles and these were introduced by the "Moderns" Chapters towards the end of the Eighteenth Century.

Many of the early examples included descriptive Latin inscriptions and except where Chapters had obtained sets of Ensigns from older erased Chapters, or had copied them, the use of Latin Inscriptions had largely disappeared by the end of the 19th century.

### **"The Ensigns On The Staves"**

The Banners or Ensigns arranged around the Altar commemorate the Children of Israel during their 4 years travel in the Wilderness, after the exodus from Egypt. In the course of which banners were regularly set up, and the tribes assembled and pitched their tents around their particular Banner.

In the Symbolical Lecture Comp.Haggai makes reference to "The Ensigns on the Staves borne by the Companions". "Banner" or "Standard" would perhaps be a more appropriate word than "Ensign", but whichever designation is applied, it must not be confused with a "flag" as we understand that object in modern times. The "Standard" or "Banner" of the period with which we are here concerned was some figure or device, generally having a symbolical meaning, carried fixed upon a lance shaft. Each Ensign then carries an emblematic device, the choice of emblem being governed by Jacob's prophecy relating to the posterity of the different tribes.

Comp. Haggai states further in his lecture "The Ensigns are the distinctive bearings of the twelve tribes of Israel, and are figurative of the peculiar blessing bequeathed to each by the Patriarch Jacob, who shortly before his death assembled his sons together for that purpose as we find recorded in Genesis Chapter 49. Not only was it a blessing, it was also a revelation concerning the character and future achievements of the Tribes".    Comp. Haggai adds " The tribes are further pointed out in the 2nd Chapter of the Book of Numbers".

As a matter of fact the tribes are enumerated five times in the Scriptures, and not one of the lists agrees exactly with the others. It is the list from Numbers 13 upon which we rely in our Royal Arch Ritual. When the Children of Israel journeyed with their families and their flocks and herds out of Egypt across unknown lands, they naturally presented a very tempting target for raiders and marauding bands, so to protect the people and the animals, and more particularly the Tabernacle, the men were formed into 4 Divisions and were stationed one Division on each side of the slowly moving mass.

The 4 Divisions or Groups of 3 Tribes, were headed by the Tribes of JUDAH , REUBEN , EPHRAIM and DAN , and the principal banners of these four tribes are shown in the East - A Lion, A Man, An Ox and an Eagle. For the sake of convenience in our Royal Arch Chapters the banners of the twelve tribes are arranged in two lines instead of a square, as is now displayed, but we will take each group in turn, representing those on the East, South, West and North sides of the square or camp.

The tribes and their respective banner are: --

### ON THE EAST SIDE

#### JUDAH

A Lion couchant surmounted by a crown and sceptre, on a crimson ground, and this great banner was in the charge of its Captain, NASHON, Prince of Judah.

#### ISSACHAR

An ass bending beneath its burden on a sky blue background, borne by the standard bearer of its Captain, NATHANEEL Prince of Issachar.

#### ZEBULON

A ship in haven on a purple ground carried by ELIAB its Captain, Prince of Zebulon.

#### JUDAH

The chief tribe, was eminently distinguished for prosperity both in peace and war. Its dignity was emphasised by Divine favour in the Almighty selecting David from this tribe to be the instrument of his blessings to the People of Israel. "The Sceptre shall not depart from Judah nor a law giver from between his feet until Shiloh comes". To this tribe was assigned the most honourable station in the Camp, that in the East at the entrance to the Tabernacle.

This tribe numbered 74,600

#### ISSACHAR

The symbol of this banner was an ass a patient animal properly adopted as an emblem of labour. It is written that the posterity of Issachar "Sat down quietly upon the land allotted to them, cultivating it with diligence". They were lovers of peace and quietness, rather than of war and merchantile pursuits, and yielded with submission to tyranny and oppression, rather than endeavour to assert themselves in battle. This tribe numbered 54,400

#### ZEBULON

Means "diveller" . The device, a ship in haven alludes to the prophecy "Zebulon shall. devell securely at the haven of the sea, safe from storms and perils, and he shall be an haven for ships and his border shall he unto ZIDON".

This tribe numbered 57,400. A total encampment of 186,400

### ON THE SOUTH SIDE

#### REUBEN

Principal Banner - A figure of a man on a red banner.

Small banner - Waves, A heaving waste of water. Sometimes with a man too, and this great banner was in the charge of its Captain ELIZUR Prince of Reuben.

#### SIMEON & (LEVI)

A sword , or crossed swords, sometimes wit a tower on a yellow ground , borne by its Captain, SHELUMIEL Prince of Simeon.

### GAD.

A troop of horsemen on a white ground, borne by its Captain ELIASAPH Prince of Gad.

### REUBEN

His device was a man, because he was the first born of his father. He would have enjoyed the prerogatives of the first-born. "The excellencies of dignity and the excellency of power" according to his just claim, had he not forfeited them by his offence, which led Jacob to say "Unstable as water, thou shalt not excel".

Jacob meant that self-will and wantonness would render Reuben unstable and untrustworthy, so the red banner depicts a heaving waste of water in allusion to the prophecy. Reuben forfeited all his rights and was reduced to an inferior position among the tribes. This tribe numbered 45,500

### SIMEON & (LEVI)

Were represented by instruments of war, the former by a sword and the latter by a dagger, in allusion to the abhorrence testified by the dying Patriarch of the cruelty of these two sons in the barbarous murder of the Shechemites under the assurances of kindness and good faith. Their father therefore said "cursed be their anger, for it was fierce and their wrath, for it was cruel. I will divide them in Jacob and scatter them in Israel". In fulfilment of this prophecy, the tribe of SIMEON had few possessions in the Promised Land, but dwelt in the midst of JUDAH, some of them wandering for afield in search of a dwelling place. As for the tribe of LEVI, it was utterly dispersed among the other tribes and devoted to the service of the Altar. The Levites were responsible for erecting and dismantling the Tabernacle on each move. This Tribe numbered 59,300

### GAD

Signifies a "troop" and therefore their device was that of a troop of horsemen.

The dying Patriarch foretold the difficulties to be encountered by the posterity of GAD in the words "GAD, a troop shall overcome him, but he shall overcome at the last". In fulfilment of the prophecy, the tribe occupying a country beyond and to the East of Jordan were exposed to attacks by the Ammonites, from whom they suffered heavily, but as the result of the military talents of Jephthah, the Ammonites were finally subdued.

The Tribe of Gad was 45,650 strong. All that were numbered in the camp of Ruben were 151,450

### ON THE WEST SIDE

#### EPHRAIM

An Ox depicted on a green background, and this great banner was in the charge of its Captain, ELISHAMA Prince of Ephraim.

#### MANASSEH

A flesh coloured banner showing a vine planted by a wall, borne by its Captain, GANALIEL Prince of Manasseh.

#### BENJAMIN

A figure of a wolf on a green banner, carried by its Captain, ABIDAN Prince of Benjamin .

#### EPHRAIM

Ephraim stepped into the inheritance of his father JOSEPH, and was elevated into one of the leading tribes of Israel. His green banner was consecrated with the figure of a cherubic emblem of the Deity "That is to say, an Ox, which denotes patient Industry and strength. "Ephraim is the strength of mine head". Let him grow into a multitude".

Ephraim's host numbered 40,500

#### MANASSEH

A flesh coloured banner which was charged with a luxuriant vine planted by the side of a wall, which its tendrils overhung. Jacob's statement "JOSEPH is a fruitful bough by a wall, shooting forth two luxuriant branches" referred to the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh, and the prediction was fulfilled by their future pre-eminence. I should here point out that on his deathbed, Jacob specially blessed Joseph's sons Ephraim and Manasseh, and on the distribution of land these two replaced Joseph and Levi, so there still remained twelve tribes. In number 32,200

## BENJAMIN

Bore a green banner with the device of a wolf, to indicate the warlike nature of the tribe. Of them, Jacob prophesied "Benjamin shall ravine as a wolf. In the morning he shall devour the prey and at night he shall divide the spoil". Although Benjamin the youngest son was a favourite with the Patriarch, Jacob conferred no particular blessing upon him owing to the fierce and warlike character of his people. Benjamin's descendants were cruel and vindictive and always fighting. They waged war single handed against all the other tribes, defeating them in battle, until eventually they made common cause against Benjamin. The military SAUL, whose life was spent in battle, and who was finally slain in conflict, sprang from this tribe. This tribe numbered 35,400 All that were numbered in the camp of Ephraim were 108,100

## ON THE NORTH SIDE

### DAN

A green banner with a horse and rider, and a serpent biting the heels of the horse. Sometimes with an eagle in the background.. This great banner being in the charge of its Captain AHJEZER Prince of DAN.

### ASHER

A cup, (on a tree) on a purple background, borne by its Captain PAGIEL Prince of Asher.

### NAPTHALI

A figure of a hind on a blue ground carried by its Captain AHIRA Prince of Napthali.

### DAN

This tribe was the largest and most powerful next to that of Judah, and for that reason, it was assigned to the dangerous position at the rear. The name "DAN" signifies "judging", therefore Jacob said "Dan shall judge his people as one of the tribes of Israel" meaning that the tribe should be the head of one of the great divisions in the Wilderness. The Patriarch added "Dan shall be a serpent by the way, an adder in the path that biteth the horse heels" ( so that its rider falleth backwards) . The tribe of Dan were ringleaders of idolatry and were the first who apostatised from God. This tribe numbered 62,700

### ASHER

Means fortune or happy. The tribe was promised a tract in the Holy Land, which should be fruitful and prolific. JACOB said "Out of Asher his bread shall be fat and he shall yield royal dainties". The tribe produced the necessities of life in abundance, and Mount Carmel, which was in their territory, abounded in the choicest fruits.

In total 41,500 souls

### NAPTHALI

JACOB' s prophecy "Naphthala is a hind let loose, he giveth goodly words" denoted that the prosperity of Napthali should be a spirited and free people, and that the tribe should be fruitful and undergo a prodigious increase. Thus, from four sons which Napthali brought with him into Egypt there proceeded upwards of 50,000 descendants when they were emancipated from their captivity.

They became celebrated for swiftness in pursuit, their portion was in Upper Galilee a country always noted for the productiveness of its soil. This tribe numbered 53,700

All that were numbered in the Camp of Dan were 157,600.

At this time the Israelitish nation numbered some 603,550

To move this number of people safely through hostile territory, along with their goods and chattels, would prove a major logistical problem today let alone 2000 years ago

That concludes this explanation of the ensigns and the tribes they are associated with.

Finally, I will read some observations from the paper compiled by Arthur Wilkins

There are in existence some very old Chapters that have a few Ensigns with variations in design to those in general use in the Royal Arch today. Recently I was invited to a Chapter where Simonon and Levi were

separate banners and there was also a Joseph, but there was no Ephraim or Manasseh, and the Ensigns were laid out in a different order to that to which we are mostly accustomed. I then found that the list of tribes they were using was that as stated in the 49th Chapter: of the Book of Genesis and arranged in the order that they were first mentioned in the Bible,

Now as you probably know, Ephraim and Manasseh were sons of Joseph and when I quote that an old inventory taken in 1791, of the furnishings etc. of the Royal Arch Chapter of St James, No.2 it included 14 Banners painted, 4 Grand Standards, Gilt Staves and Rich Fringe. Another, the Chapter of Fortitude around the same era purchased 4 large Banners and poles, 14 Ensigns of Tribes and 14 Wands for smaller Ensigns, it seems quite feasible to me that in the very early days of the Royal Arch, Ephraim and Manasseh were added to the original twelve first mentioned making it 14 Tribes.

In conclusion, Companions, should you visit a Chapter where the Ensigns are slightly varied or are laid out in a different manner to your own, you will now know the reason why.