

Commentary on the Royal Arch Officers (Revised July 2015)

Banners and Implements

This commentary on the officers, banners and implements that are connected with the Royal Arch ceremony is offered as a practical alternative to the rehearsal of an Exaltation. If the officers recite or read their own designated sections the other explanations can usually be undertaken by the rest of the Companions who are present. When giving the explanations of an ensign or implement the speaker should hold, or point to, the item being described.

Zerubbabel

I am ZERUBBABEL. I am the first Principal of the Chapter and in charge of this Convocation, the name that we give to a meeting of a Royal Arch Chapter. The Chapter is the place where those who are fully qualified Master Masons meet to learn about and share the complete or supreme knowledge of The Mason's Craft. Three Principals are needed to rule a Chapter because originally the revelation of the great Secret of construction was to know how to form a right-angled triangle as the basis of all design and erection. This needed three participants, each with a rod of different dimensions, which, when joined together created the required figure. That is why the absence or loss of one ruler meant that temporarily the 'secret was lost'. It is also why we three Principals each still have a rod or sceptre.

My name means 'God the Father in the East' and as the one I represent was a prince or leader of the Jewish people in exile in Babylon my rod bears a crown which reminds us of God's omnipotence. I was the one given authority by Cyrus, the Persian ruler, to lead the first group of Jewish people back to Canaan and Jerusalem where the city and temple were to be rebuilt. My task and responsibility, together with my co-Principals, is still to appoint suitable people to the work and to reveal to them the full knowledge that we share in a Chapter

Haggai

I am HAGGAI. I am the second Principal appointed to rule in the Chapter.

As the first Principal has told you I possess a part of the ancient knowledge that is peculiar to a Conclave. It may interest you to know that in some old Chapters it is still customary for all present to form threes when opening and closing a Chapter, just as we Principals do. That was to prove that all those present were fully qualified members. It was also to remind the Companions of the princely, prophetic and priestly aspects of our Order by so taking part.

My name, meaning 'festive', refers to one of the books of the Bible and one of my roles is that of a prophet. That is why the rod that I bear carries an 'All Seeing Eye' that symbolically represents the omnipresence of the Almighty. My role after the return of the Jews from exile in Babylon was that of scribe and I acted in that capacity in the first Sanhedrin that was set up after we had settled again in Jerusalem.

The Sanhedrim was the council set up to govern the people of Israel and was composed of six persons from each of the twelve tribes. One of those representatives was the prince that presided over the Sanhedrin and another was the Scribe who recorded their decisions. If a deciding vote had

to be given the High Priest was brought in to do so. Thus all those present as our Principals were needed to conclude essential business.

Joshua

I am JOSHUA. I am the third Principal who assists in ruling the Chapter.

My name means 'the God who saves' and my role is not only that of a priest but of a High Priest. It is I, and not my father Josedech, who has that honour. That is why the rod that I bear has a 'mitre' at its head.

In earlier days, and still in a few English Chapters, the person in my chair wore a breastplate that had twelve jewels representing the twelve tribes of Israel, like the ensigns. Incidentally the three Principals used to wear as headgear the items now represented on their rods. In a very few Chapters headress is still worn.

The mitre and breastplate of the third Principal represent the omniscience of the Almighty who has entrusted to his people, and us the priests in particular, the sacred knowledge of the Scriptures, prayers and ceremonies that God revealed to Israel. That is why it is usually my responsibility to pray and read passages from the Volume of the Sacred Law at our meetings.

It is no coincidence that the name that this Principal bears is the same in Hebrew as that which we know as Jesus. For in the earlier days of this Order its Christian significance was paramount and there was much in the ritual about Jesus as the High Priest entering the Holy of Holies to make atonement for the sins of the people. That is why the use of the cords for being lowered into the sacred vault referred to that priestly practice.

Ezra

I am SCRIBE EZRA. In the Scriptural account I was the leader of the second group of Israelites who returned to Jerusalem. Much of the building of the next Temple had been completed by the time I arrived so that my task was to ensure the restoration of the Law of Moses as that which was taught and followed by those attached to the Temple, whether as its servants or its attendants. That is why in our Conclave lectures I am described as an 'expounder of the Sacred Law'. My name means 'help'.

The work was especially necessary because the returned exiles had become used to speaking and writing in the Chaldee tongue and they now had to become familiar once more with the original Hebrew text of the Scriptures. It is interesting to learn that though Ezra taught the people Hebrew he wrote what was to be taught in the Chaldean alphabet.

Because Ezra was a learned person who sought to instruct the people in the holy scriptures it is not surprising that in English Chapters he still wears a surplice, the dress of a speaker or teacher in the Established Church of this land. The white of his clothing also relates to what was once the white veil that was reached when the three other veils ceremony ended and that divided the candidate from the Holy of Holies where the three Principals were meant to be seated. To further represent this veil many Chapters require the Scribes to stand by the easternmost staves when the candidate is being obligated.

Nehemiah

I am SCRIBE NEHEMIAH. I was the leader of the third group of Jews returning to Jerusalem. In exile I had been the king's cup-bearer, or the one who tested what he might drink before he did so. On my return I was also, like Scribe Ezra, appointed an officer of the Sanhedrin and given the role of a Scribe.

My name means 'God's consolation' and my task was to superintend the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem so that the Temple and people might be safe from the attacks of those who resented the return of the exiles' descendants. Some of these opponents were the Samaritans and that is why there was conflict between them and the Jews for centuries afterwards.

The distinction of my office is marked, as explained for Ezra, by the wearing of a surplice and this garb of a teacher should remove any notion of my office being the Chapter equivalent of an Inner Guard, wherever I may be placed. My duty is to assist the Scribe Ezra and in some Chapters it is further marked by our doing the veiling and unveiling of the pedestal rather than by the Principals. In any case it is our privilege to equip the men who are engaged for the work of clearing the new Temple's ground and then further preparing them for their investiture. It is not a menial task but a respected office.

Principal Sojourner

I am the PRINCIPAL SOJOURNER. I am nowadays an officer of the Chapter but as my name suggests I originally represented someone who came from outside and requested the opportunity to 'sojourn', or spend days, in the company of the Companions and assist them in their labours.

At one stage in the 18th Century the candidates were called 'the sojourners' and as three candidates were required for the ceremony, as is still the case in some parts of the United States of America, the idea of three sojourners began.

At this point the obligated candidates once simply listened to a lecture but as the ceremony developed the need for three more officers became evident.

In the Chapters held in the Antients' lodges there was the Excellent (or Super Excellent) Master degree that is more popularly known as the 'Ceremony of the Veils'. In that ceremony I was known as the Captain of the Third Veil. It was as one passed through that veil that the first mention of God's true name was given. After 1834 this ceremony was discontinued in England and the form that is presently practised was established. As you will know my role is that of the discoverer of the secrets in the vault but it has always to be remembered that I do this on behalf of the candidate so my old role in that position is in part restored. What might seem strange is that, as I am in the West of a lodge, it is my privilege to close the Chapter.

An ancient link with Craft working is thus retained.

First Assistant Sojourner

I am the FIRST ASSISTANT SOJOURNER. My traditional task, as hinted by the Principal Sojourner, was to offer my services as one of the Israelites returning from Babylon, to help reconstruct the Temple in Jerusalem that was destroyed by the Assyrians. As you have also been told there was a time before 1834 when another degree was practised before the actual Exaltation. The degree was conducted in three parts, each of which were separated by one of three curtains coloured blue, purple and crimson. These colours are still recalled by the colours of the robes of the three Principals. I was appointed to be in charge of the second or purple curtain and was known as the Captain of the Second Veil. Within the area behind that veil candidates were reminded of the encounter between Moses and the Pharaoh who ruled Egypt, prior to the release of the Hebrews from that land. It may be noted that this Veils ceremony emphasises the idea of release from exile that is still a theme retained in our current practice. It may also be of interest to learn that in Scotland it is the custom for the officer in my position to be the one who is lowered into the vault rather than the principal Sojourner. Whether that means that I am more easily dispensed with or that the Principal Sojourner must remain in charge of the operation is not disclosed.

Second Assistant Sojourner

I am the SECOND ASSISTANT SOJOURNER, though in some places I am called the Junior Assistant Sojourner. Mention has already been made of why there are three of us and of other duties which we had to perform in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries Those tasks are still performed in Bristol where a Ceremony of the Veils was allowed to be reintroduced almost a century ago. It may be of interest to learn that in West Yorkshire today there is a Chapter that uses the older and much longer opening ritual that involves the questioning by the MEZ of each of the officers as to what are their several duties. In my case the answer that is there to be given is 'The Captain of the First Veil' and the duty of that office is 'To guard that veil and allow none to pass without giving the word and grip of that veil and to report the same to the Captain of the Third Veil'. Thus is retained the memory of the older form of part of Royal Arch Masonry even though there is not the least semblance of a veil in that Chapter today. Such practice reminds us of the antiquity of our ceremonies and the fact that my office, like others, is not here by chance. Even our name of Sojourner helps us to realise that whilst Sojourners may first have been temporary visitors they are now necessary parts of the whole Exaltation process.

The Lion Banner

This, the first of the principal banners, that displays a LION, is so placed in the Book of Numbers chapter 2 verse 2. The lion was the emblem of Judah, the tribe which was to produce the royal line of David and Solomon. In the Book of Numbers we also read that Judah's companies were to be placed in the East, towards the point of the sunrise, when the Israelites made camp in the wilderness of Sinai. That, in current Masonic terms, certainly indicates a position of rule and majesty.

The colour portrayed on this first banner is crimson or blood red and this agrees with more of the words used by Jacob in Genesis chapter 49: 'Judah will tether his donkey to a vine, washing his garments in wine and his robes in the blood of grapes'. This also fits in with the colour of the carbuncle jewel which represented Judah in the High Priest's breast-plate. The later connection of

the lion with St. Mark was because the gospel bearing his name begins with the words, 'The voice of one roaring in the wilderness'.

The Man Banner

This, the second principal banner, bears another representative emblem of the tribe of Reuben. In this case the symbol used is totally different to that of the 'waves', that is shown on the ensign of Reuben. This, however, is just as appropriate because it was then noted that the name Reuben meant 'Behold a son' and Jacob's words in Genesis chapter 49 are similar: 'This is my first born, my might, the first sign of my strength'. It is therefore hardly surprising that such words might suggest the figure of a MAN.

What can be a matter of great interest when visiting another Chapter is discovering the type of man that is shown in each case. Since the words of Jacob include the following: 'You shall not excel because you went up to my couch and defiled it' the man on this banner is sometimes shown partially naked with but a scanty cloak, and hence sometimes it looks like John the Baptist. Other figures look like a king or prophet and this is also appropriate because, as this symbol was later used to represent St. Matthew, who told the story of God becoming man amongst the Jews, it is right to see this figure as a teacher or leader.

The colour connected with this banner was flesh-coloured or pink-red and this linked up with the cornelian stone in the High Priest's breastplate.

The Ox Banner

The third principal banner relates to the tribe of Ephraim, that camped in the West, and therefore, like the ensign of this same tribe it bears the figure of an OX. The words of Moses in Deuteronomy chapter 33 point out that the creature that was their symbol was sometimes a bull, a bullock or even a calf. These animals, just because they represented creatures of great strength, were those that were frequently chosen for sacrifice on the great altar of the Temple at Jerusalem. It was this fact that linked the ox with the Gospel writer, St. Luke, since he was the one who specially told the story of the sacrifice of Christ.

The colour associated with Ephraim was dark or bluey green and this linked up, as we learnt earlier, with a jasper. The green colour also relates to the further blessing that was associated with the sons of Joseph: 'the choicest fruits of the sun and the finest produce of the ancient mountains'.

The Eagle Banner

The fourth and last of the principal banners is one which displays an EAGLE. Since this banner is representative of the tribe of Dan it may at first seem strange that this symbol is so different from that on the ensign, a horseman whose steed is attacked by a serpent. Yet there is a connection with the Zodiac sign of Capricorn, an eagle with a serpent in its grasp. There is another passage in Genesis chapter 48 verse 18 where we read: 'I look for your deliverance, O Lord', and this comes at the end of the section relating to Dan. This has been linked in the past with Moses's words in Deuteronomy where he says: 'The Most High shielded him and cared for him, like an eagle that alerts its nest and hovers over its young, spreading its wings to catch them and carry them on its pinions'. The link of the eagle with St. John the Evangelist may relate to several themes: the good news brought to God's

brood as if by a flying angel, or to the heavenward ascension of Christ; or even, as has been said, when the eagle holds a serpent in its claws, thus signifying the conquest of good over evil. The colour of this banner is light green, for the tribal stone as worn by the High Priest was a sapphire.

The Triple Tau

Here we have the TRIPLE TAU which may be described as the true distinguishing mark of the Holy Royal Arch. The requirement of a 'mark' is not here accidental because all those who were true Master Masons in earlier days had already passed through what we now call the Mark degrees and had been provided with their special and personal Mark. The Tau is certainly a mark of 'perfect life', as we are taught in this Order from the Book of Ezekiel. Bearing in mind, however, the original association of this Order with Moses, a possible Egyptian reference is not out of place. The 'T' form of this Mark was exactly the same as that of the instrument known as a Nilometer, which was placed beside that great river at the time of its annual flooding. If the water reached the crossbar then irrigation was assured and the crops providing food for the whole population was again assured. The Tau has also a reference to the Cross.

The Romans made a convicted criminal carry the cross beam to the place of execution and then that beam was laid on top of the upright stake that was already fixed in the ground. The notice of the prisoner's crime was then sometimes nailed to the back of the cross beam, thus giving the outline with which most of us are familiar. The Tau has the true shape of the cross itself. The union of the three taus corresponds at least to the idea of the three Principals uniting for their proper communication of the Royal Arch secrets.

The Trowel

This is the TROWEL. Since the trowel was eventually a sign of a Passed Master, who was thus recognised as fit to assist in completing the building of the Second Temple, and only such Masons were originally admitted as Companions, it is not surprising that the Trowel figures prominently amongst the implements on the floor of the Chapter room.

During the reconstruction of the sacred edifice and the walls of Jerusalem there was always a danger of interruption or arrack by those who wanted to prevent this work being carried out. Accordingly we are informed that those engaged on the building work were to have their trowel in one hand and their sword or weapon of defence ready to use with the other. The trowel being the implement that applied the mortar that binds the building units together was recognised as a symbol of brotherly or companionable unity. It was also a sign of confidentiality in so far as the secrets of a brother would be equally well preserved and cemented in his breast. It is not surprising that the tool of the Worshipful Masters, as also of the early initiates, was a trowel.

The Sword

This is the SWORD. We have already heard that this implement was necessary at the rebuilding of the Temple and walls of Jerusalem and its introduction into our Order was part of enacting that scriptural situation. The fact that one is made a Prince and ruler when invested in the Royal Arch meant that in the 18th Century such an implement would also fit the rank of such a person. The sword even began to replace the trowel in the Craft.

The fact that the sword was presumed to be held in the left hand, as the trowel was in the right, helps to explain why the sash that may once have held a sword is on the right; why the penalty in this Order is given with the left hand, as if holding a sword; and why the toast to our Grand Originals is given with the left hand.

The presence of a sword, as that wielded by a worthy defender of the holy places, also explains how easy it was to link the Royal Arch with what was once its immediate partner, the Knight Templar degree. Since all Knights Templar had, in the medieval Order, to be of noble blood the idea of Princes and Rulers in this Order made their holders very natural candidates.

The Janitor

I am (or represent) the JANITOR. The principle of having someone to keep the meeting places of Freemasons private and safe meant that every part of the Society had its own officers to discharge this task. In the 18th Century, whether the Royal Arch was conducted as part of the Craft practice, as with the Antients, or as a separate but attached practice of some lodge members, the person who kept the outer door was the same Tyler for both. When the Royal Arch was organised separately from the Craft, and especially after 1834, a new title was given to the keeper of the outer door. He was now called the Janitor. The term was an appropriate one in Freemasonry for it derives from the same Roman God, Janus, with two faces, who gave his name to January, the month that looks back on the past year and looks forward to the new.

The Janitor is the one who, while keeping a wary eye out for strangers and intruders is also expected to care for the new candidate as he prepares for his fresh experiences in the Chapter. Having their old Craft lodge connection firmly in mind some old Chapters today still have an Outer Janitor and an Inner one. This is not a tradition that ought to be maintained for it is hoped that the status of the Scribe Nehemiah, already described, needs to be recognised as being of more significance than a mere doorkeeper.