




MOST EXCELLENT MASTER - CONSECRATION CEREMONY FOR THE ENLIGHTENED MIND

In the York Rite system of degrees, that of Most Excellent Master is the first which most likely originated in America. While we can find several degrees in England, Ireland and Scotland, which bear the names of Excellent none of them have any resemblance to the Most Excellent Master degree practised in most, if not all, the American Grand Chapters of Royal Arch Masons.   

It is believed the degree originated in Temple Chapter at Albany, New York about 1797. Indeed, Thomas Smith Webb, author of the American craft ritual, was situated in Albany at that time and was busily publishing the first American ritual monitor, which included the York degrees. He and a fellow named Hanmer had organized Temple Lodge a year earlier so they could work the Royal Arch degree. Webb gave an account of the Most Excellent Master degree in his first edition of the Freemason's Monitor. It is not known whether Webb invented the degree, or simply arranged it from other previous works. 'Mere is some evidence that it had been worked for several years prior to 1797. However, in publishing it with his first monitor, he may well have expanded or improved its ritual form. Regardless of origin, Webb is certainly given the credit for having brought the Most Excellent Master into the Royal Arch system.

Undoubtedly, the degree is one of those supplementary degrees which arose during the time when ritual differences among the lodges had the state of the craft in general chaos. It is felt the Most Excellent Master degree was actually incorporated into the regular Capitular system to fill a gap which existed in the ritual system of the time. As we know, the Temple was left unfinished in the Third degree and the Royal Arch degree noted its destruction. It's completion and consecration; It's use as the central glory of the Jewish nation for the four hundred years, which elapsed between the legend of Hiram and the destruction of the temple, had previously been passed over by the rituals of all the other Rites extant during the 18th Century. And so this degree seemed essential to the overall legend of the Masonic degrees, and in developing the complete allegory of Freemasonry.

Here, we find the candidate in waiting to join a lodge dedicated to the memory of King Solomon. He has been advanced to the degree of Mark Master, inducted into the oriental chair of Solomon as a Past Master, and is received and acknowledged as a Most Excellent Master. It is significant to note that he is not initiated into anything in this degree. His initiation process was completed in the Mark degree. He was initiated into the higher mysteries at the altar of symbolic Masonry. Thus, he is already the Complete Man, or Master Mason. And he comes to this degree clothed as a Master Mason. Thus, in the Most Excellent Master's degree, he is "received and acknowledged," meaning that the lodge recognizes he has already passed the tests of proficiency and has "made himself" a Most Excellent Master." The lodge is simply honouring, with a ceremonial form, his adeptship in Masonry.

We also observe he has a cabletow six times about his body. This has a double meaning. First, it represents the normal progression of degrees, indicating that Masonry is a progressive science attainable only by degrees. Just as the cabletow is wrapped once in the Entered Apprentice Degree, twice in the Fellow craft, and etc., it is the sixth degree of Masonry he is now entering upon. Secondly, he is reminded that he has taken six obligations in masonry and thus owes a double allegiance to his own duties and responsibilities as a Master Mason.

The obligation of this degree is one of the most profound in all of Masonry. It recognizes for the first time that the real mission of Masonry, and each individual Mason, is to enlighten mankind and make the acquisition and teaching of knowledge a duty, rather than an ideal. The steps the candidate takes in the altar approach has the same numerical meaning in sequence to the first degree of Masonry.

And, if the symbolism of the Master's degree implies that one is bound to his relationships with God, his fellow and his society; then, in the Most Excellent Master, one becomes aware of the trinity within himself which can lead him to salvation only with good faith and right action.

It is also a degree "in memoriam" of Hiram Abiff, the Master Builder of our great legend. We observe the vacant seat and are reminded that our own earthly life must also end. We should thus live in this world so that, when we cross that distant shore where only the true and faithful dwell, we will be mourned by those we leave behind.

In the second section of the Most Excellent Master we return to the biblical account of the completion and dedication of the temple. In fact much of the degree is centered around the story given in one Kings, Chapter 8. A historical account is given of the years required to erect the edifice, the labour of men working side by side and the joy of achievement that was felt when the last stone (the cope-stone) was placed, thus signalling the temple was completed. But one thing remained to be done - to seat the sacred Ark of the Covenant in the most holy place and to solemnly dedicate and consecrate this noble temple to God. A monument of architectural beauty, regardless of how superbly erected, is bid an empty shell until sanctified by the Divine presence.

So it is with all human endeavour. No human achievement, however noble or perfect, can be done alone; nor can it attain its full potential until in spirit and purpose, it is consecrated by Divine Will. Thus, the Temple of our present life, symbolically erected by ourselves as individual Masons, assisted by our family, friends and brothers, is not truly complete until dedicated to God and consecrated to the service of mankind.

As Master Masons, we place our own cope-stone and review our own life, and we must regularly consider if we have built well our moral and spiritual temple. We have indeed built our life and erected it from the materials of our own heart. But we must thoughtfully reflect if what we have built is suitable for the indwelling with God. And, if it is not, we must hasten to consecrate it so that God may dwell therein forever. The cope-stone is symbolical of death, beyond which lies eternity.

The Most Excellent Master's degree teaches us that the Temple of Solomon is truly a symbol of mortal life, limited and perishable, vain and empty until consecrated to a higher purpose and sanctified by the indwelling of God. To our ancient brethren, it was a living Temple, harboring the presence of God; to us it is the symbol around which is woven, in the great allegorical language of Masonry, the principles by which we are to erect the moral and spiritual temple of our second life.

The word given in the degree is Aramaic, which was the language of our Lord and Saviour. It is found only once in the Bible as a title of honour given by Mary of Magdala, when she addressed Jesus after the resurrection. It signifies the Teacher or Master.

There is no greater gift man can give his fellow man than knowledge. It is the charge of the Most Excellent Master that we learn well so we can "dispense Light and Truth to the uninformed Mason." In so doing, we will indeed become a Most Excellent Master over ourselves - a Teacher, a Master - a Great One!

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York Rite Crusader Winter 1999 RAM Fall2000