

THE REVISION OF THE ROYAL ARCH RITUAL

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First may I allay any fears that may have arisen in the minds of Companions when they saw the title of this afternoon's talk. In musical terms it is NOT a prelude to yet more variation of a much loved theme. Rather, it is a bringing together, for the record, of what has happened in recent years and why it happened. As the events are of recent vintage that might beg the question of why? The answer is simple. As an historian I know only too well how short and fallible is the memory of man and how important therefore it is to have an accurate summary of major events.

The basis of our present ceremonies was itself the result of a major revision of the then ritual in 1834. According to the official record "there being some doubt as to what the proper ceremonies were" the then First Grand Principal (HRH The Duke of Sussex, KG) set up a special committee to establish what those ceremonies were and to bring about a standard ritual to be agreed by Supreme Grand Chapter and adopted by all Chapters then existing or which might come into existence in the future.

The aim of producing an agreed ritual was met but the aim of achieving uniformity of working amongst all Chapters was not. This was a result of the total ban on the new ceremonies being issued in manuscript or print. A special Chapter of Promulgation was chartered to meet in London to give demonstrations of the new ceremonies to which Chapters were invited to send delegates to learn the approved ritual. If we remember that the only forms of transport in those days were foot, horse or carriage then we can begin to see why uniformity was not achieved. Chapters in Carlisle, Newcastle, Truro, or Wales would send delegates on a journey of five days and nights by coach to London. They would see the new ceremonies demonstrated possibly twice, irritate their fellow passengers on the journey back by constantly muttering under their breaths, call a meeting of their Companions and pass on to them what they thought they remembered seeing at the demonstration in London. Hence the development of the variety of workings of the Royal Arch under our Grand Chapter, which of course makes visiting all the more interesting for us.

The 1834 special committee did not simply revise the existing ceremonies, they also innovated, and in doing so laid the seeds of the problems which resulted in the most recent revision of the ritual. Our knowledge of the pre-1834 ritual depends on some sixty manuscripts of varying states of completeness. In the majority of them the pedestal and what appeared on its top are described but in none of them is an explanation given for those items - in particular the Hebrew characters and the tripartite word. In formulating the Mystical Lecture the 1834 special committee attempted to explain those particular items but so basic was their knowledge of Hebrew, biblical studies and Egyptology that their attempt to be helpful misfired.

The recent revisions of the Royal Arch ritual fall into three sections:

- a. solving the problem of involving more Companions in the ceremony itself;
- b. the problem of the physical penalties;
- c. the more fundamental problem of the tripartite word and the Hebrew characters.

Involving more Companions in the ceremony of exaltation was more a question of rearranging than revising the ceremony. One of the factors that had been put forward as a reason why fewer Companions were progressing in the Royal Arch was the sheer amount of work which fell upon the Principals and the

Principal Sojourner. In April 1977 Supreme Grand Chapter agreed that there was no reason why the Principal's Lecture should not be given in catechetical form, an ideal way of lessening the learning load for the Principals and involving more Companions in the meeting. Some Grand Superintendents were quick to point out that the wheel was being re-invented as their Chapters had always worked in this way and the ritual historians pointed out that what was proposed was not a revision but in fact a return to basics, the 18th century ritual have been largely in catechetical form.

The question of physical penalties in the obligations was one which had begun in the Craft in the late 1940s. A half-way house had been reached in 1964 with the introduction of the permissive variation in which the penalties were referred to as traditional. This did not satisfy all and the debate continued resulting in the major debate in Grand Lodge on 11 June 1986 when it was agreed to remove the physical penalties from the obligations. As the Royal Arch is the completion of the Third Degree this Craft decision would obviously have an effect on the Royal Arch. On the 11 February 1987 a similar resolution regarding the Royal Arch obligation was proposed by the President of the Committee of General Purposes and, a full debate having taken place in the Craft, was passed without further discussion.

The question of suspect Hebrew in the ceremonies was to cause greater problems. It had long been realised that the explanations given on Hebrew words and characters were capable of giving offence to Jewish Companions, though many of them had taken a pragmatic attitude and quietly dropped the offending explanations. On 14 November 1979, E Comp. the Rev Canon Tydeman gave a talk to Grand Chapter entitled "A new approach to mystical Hebrew" (now often referred to as the bumble bee lecture) which formally opened up the whole question and led to the setting up of a special committee to take advice and comment from Grand Superintendents and others. Further talks to Grand Chapter on the subject were given by Canon Tydeman, the then Third Grand Principal (the Rev. F.G.W.W. Heydon) and the late Colin Dyer whose divergent opinions showed the reality of the problem.

The problem was to be exacerbated by outside events - in particular investigations into Freemasonry by the Methodist and Anglican Churches and general comment in the press. Despite having been told that the content of the Royal Arch ritual was under discussion and that any comments they made about the then ritual could be negated by any changes suggested by the special ritual committee the General Synod's Working Group latched onto the tripartite word and the mystical Hebrew and claimed that members of the Royal Arch were open to accusations of blasphemy. This had one history making effect - for the first time in over 150 years an Especial Convocation of Supreme Grand Chapter was called on 8 July 1987 to refute any such charges.

Wisely the special Ritual Committee refused to be rushed by such outside events and carefully continued exploring with Grand Superintendents, the governing bodies of the various Workings and many individual Companions the possible ways of dealing with the problem. A number of interim reports were published leading to a demonstration in Grand Chapter on 10 February 1988 of a revised ceremony of Exaltation emphasising the difference between the Name and the Word. Comment afterwards, however, showed that many Companions believed that because it had been bandied about so much in the media the Word had lost any pretence of being secret and had been greatly devalued and should therefore be removed altogether. The special ritual committee took all views into consideration and presented a demonstration to Supreme Grand Chapter on 9 November 1988 of the exaltation ceremony without the Word or the Hebrew characters and gave notice that a motion would be proposed at the Convocation to be held on 8 February 1989 that all reference to the Hebrew characters and the Word on the triangle be removed from the ritual and that for the future the Principals should take their obligations on the VSL. A major debate took place on 8 February 1989 and the revisions to the ritual were carried by a substantial majority.

It has naturally been claimed by many critics of Freemasonry that those changes were as a result of outside pressure. Sadly there appear to be Companions who have a similar opinion. I hope that this short talk will

have dispelled that view. As with all major changes in Freemasonry throughout our long history changes have been brought about because of altered attitudes within Freemasonry itself. Even then those changes have only been made after lengthy consultation, wide discussion and open debate in either Grand Lodge or Supreme Grand Chapter. Unfortunately there is a variation on Murphy's law which runs that when you are reaching the culmination of searching investigations someone will jump in and try to take credit for the results. That is what happened in this case but as we all know and the record shows the recent revisions in our ritual were the culmination of a process begun long before the recent attacks from outside began and took place because they were wanted from within.