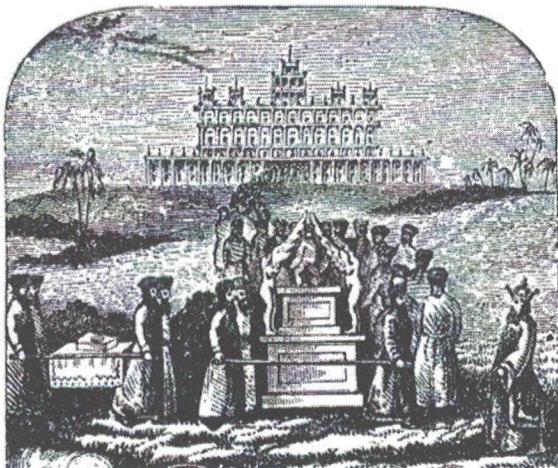


# CAPITULAR DEVELOPMENT COURSE

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## Most Excellent Master Degree

### Brief History

The Symbolic Degrees are set in the nearly completed Temple of King Solomon, as is the Mark Degree. The more elaborate Actual Past Master's Degree, as practiced in England at least from the mid-1800s, and in the longer explanation in the Ritual practiced in some States, is set in the Temple

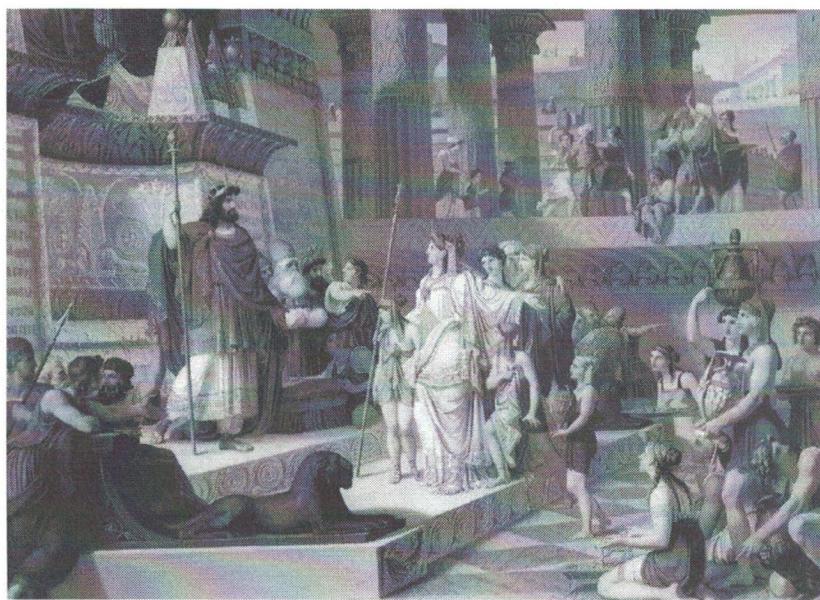


Figure 48 - 'Solomon and the Queen of Sheba' by Giovanni Demin

at a time following its completion and dedication, and describes the visit of the Queen of Sheba to see the Temple with her own eyes. In the Royal Arch Degree we will move forward several hundred years in history to a time when Solomon's Temple lies in ruins. Masonry abhors a vacuum, and it was perhaps inevitable that at some point a ritual would be written which covered perhaps the most important moment in the story of King Solomon's Temple: its completion and dedication.

There is a symbolic and esoteric reason why this story needed to be told, too. How are we to move from the story of an incomplete Temple which is meant to represent that Temple we are building within ourselves, to the rebuilding of the Second Temple and discovery of Truth, if we never completed the first task?

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Given these facts it would be quite easy to believe in the long-told story that it was Thomas Smith Webb who penned the Ritual for Most Excellent Master, in order to create the perfect conclusion to the Blue Lodge system and the transition into the Red Degree of Holy Royal Arch. Indeed, that is what many researchers both assumed and wrote in their books. However, the story is far more complicated than that.

In the previous session we learned that St. Andrew's Royal Arch Lodge conferred the Excellent Master Degree, which is believed to be an early form of the Past Master Degree. However, they also conferred a Degree called the Super Excellent Master (not to be confused with the Degree of the same name conferred in a Cryptic Council). The name 'Excellent' was already used in several Degrees in existence in the mid-1700s. While a number of members had connections with Irish Masonry, which included Degrees with names such as 'Excellent' and 'Super Excellent', there is a likely candidate in the 19<sup>th</sup> Degree of the Scottish Early Grand Rite, called 'Most Excellent Master', which closely resembles our present Degree. The Candidate is admitted on the Keystone, and the Most Excellent Master who presides tells the Candidate: "This degree was founded to commemorate the finishing of the first Temple..." It is the conclusion of the authors of the official history of the Royal Arch Degrees, commissioned by the General Grand Chapter, that this is the most probable source of the Most Excellent Master Degree, despite the fact that there is no clear trail showing how the Degree traveled from Scotland to America. They add the interesting comment that the name 'Excellent' almost certainly came from the Geneva Bible (which was commonly in use in the colonies at the time, alongside the King James Bible, from a footnote to 1Kings, 5:18 which said: "The Ebew worde is Giblim which some say, were excellent masons" (*sic*)).

Also of note, while the Degree might have come from Scotland, the Degree called 'Excellent' in their system nowadays is a required precursor to receiving the Royal Arch Degree, but its Ritual now encompasses the Passing of the Veils. It was also noted above that some researchers believe the Most Excellent Master Degree may originally have been a part of an extended version of the Mark Degree, in which the Keystone, having been lost and found, was then used to complete the Temple.

Whatever its origin, it was not the original work of Thomas Smith Webb. Records show that, in 1783, St. John's Lodge No. 2 in Middletown, Connecticut formed a Chapter, at which several members were introduced into the "sublime degree of most excellent Masons." However, the

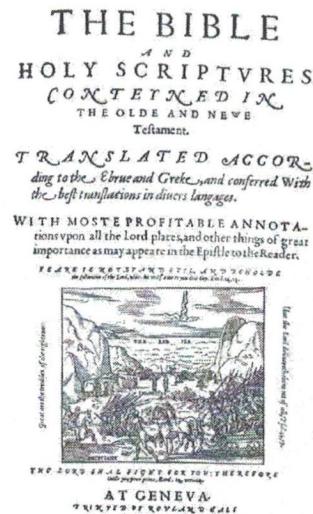


Figure 49 - Frontispiece of the Geneva Bible of 1560

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records show the ceremony took no longer than 30 minutes, which would scarcely have allowed time to place the Keystone, and certainly not enough time to perform the Dedication Ceremony.

In 1797 Temple Chapter, a Royal Arch Chapter, was founded in Albany by Webb and others, with Webb being installed as High Priest. At the following meeting, in mid-February, five Candidate (Ezra Ames among them) had the Degree of Most Excellent Master conferred upon them. However, Webb and his colleague, John Hanmer had already learned of this Degree in 1796, when they visited Cyrus and St. Andrew's Chapters. The version they observed and recorded was the shorter one which only included the placing of the Keystone. While not the author of the Most Excellent Master Degree, most researchers are confident that he was the ritualist who expanded the Degree into its present form, including the important processions and the Dedication of the Temple.

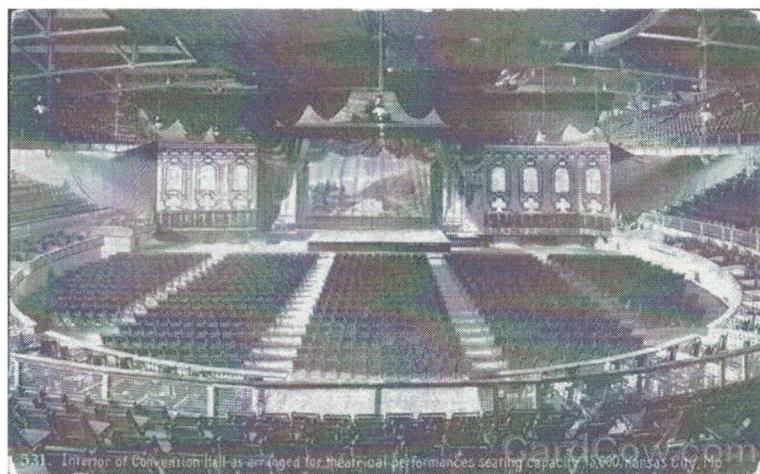


Figure 50 - Interior of Old Convention Hall, Kansas City

While this Degree can be performed with dignity by a relatively small cast, it has always been the one which has attracted the most opulent performances. Of course, modern laws forbid the burning of incense or the lighting of banks of candles in many locations, and in particular the extravagant pyrotechnics which were the culmination of this Degree, when the Shekinah descended from heaven to light the pot of incense. In 1922 in the old Convention Hall in

Kansas City, Missouri, in the presence of the General Grand High Priest, Dr. William Frederick Kuhn, over *one thousand* Candidates received the Degree before an audience of over *eight thousand* Companions. A seventy-five piece orchestra and one hundred fifty-strong choir provided the music; and the processions contained between two to three hundred participants! However, the opulence of the Ritual should not take away from the important message: that one cycle has ended and a new cycle – a more spiritual one – is about to begin.

### Purpose of the Degree

The Degree is what is sometimes called a ‘pivot Degree’, in that it completes one story cycle and prepares for the next cycle. Indeed, in mainland Europe the Royal Arch has played such a role in the past: in both the Rite of Strict Observance of Baron von Hund and the Scottish Rectified Rite of Jean-Baptiste Willermoz in the late 1700s, both being Christian Orders, the Royal Arch story

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was used to lead the candidates from the Old Testament stories to the New Testament. Hiram was depicted as having risen from the dead, as an Exemplar for all Masons who, having completed the physical Temple, now needed to see it torn down – symbolized by Hiram's death – in order to rise again from the ruins and discover Truth, which was symbolized by Hiram's resurrection.

In this sense the preceding Degrees are now crowned by this final scene. As participants in the building of the Temple, the Craftsmen who discovered the assassins, who marked their work and received wages, and who were installed as Masters, as the Overseers of other more junior Workmen, and who thereby proved their proficiency in all the preceding Degrees, are finally recognized as Most Excellent Masters. We have completed our labors upon the physical Temple in the physical Sphere, and are now going to Graduate, in a sense, before taking up more spiritual labors. In this Degree we physically enact a great spiritual Truth: the completed Temple is now fit to house the Ark of the Covenant, just as our Great Work upon ourselves – that work of spiritual alchemy – has transformed ourselves from rough, crude stones into a Temple of holiness and morality fit to house the Divine Spark of Truth.

Since then the one major change made to the Ritual in many States has been the elimination of the Most Excellent Masters Song, penned by Webb himself. We are fortunate in New York that the song is still included in our Ritual. Every attempt should be made to sing it: the best tune to use is O Come All Ye Faithful (*Adeste Fideles*), since many people know the tune. The penultimate line needs to be repeated three times. If that is not possible, if there is a soloist of any worth in the Chapter, they may sing it as a solo. The atmosphere then becomes more powerful for the focus it brings to the ceremony.

### The Six Circumambulations

Following the admission, there is a challenge, in which he candidate is tested with the Keystone. Having carried it as someone else's work in the Mark Degree, now he is finally identified with it himself. This symbolizes the fact that he is now passing to a higher level, and as this Most Excellent Master Degree represents, in a way the second turn of the cycle of development, so in this Degree, which follows the usual form of all the preceding Degrees (with the exception of the Past Master

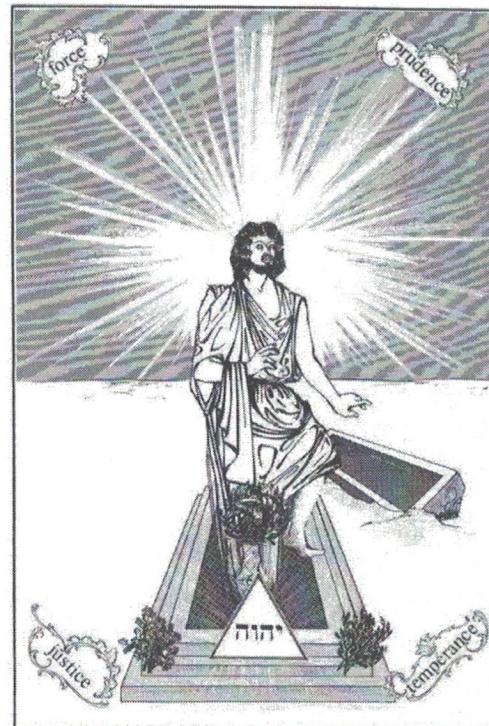


Figure 51 - Hiram rising from his tomb (from the Degree of Scottish Master of St. Andrew)

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Degree, which requires no challenge at the door of the Lodge), we can see the progression of tools and objects with which the candidate is challenged tells its own story.

The Profane entering the Lodge is challenged with no particular instrument, other than being told that it is sharp. In England it is a dagger or poignard; but the important thing is that it is sharp and he feels it. There are many meanings to this symbol, from the prick of conscience to the simpler barring entrance.

However, once he becomes a Mason, he is challenged with a progression of implements, from the Square, then the Compasses, then the Engravers Chisel, and finally here the Keystone. This is no random progression. His first challenge is with the symbol of the Terrestrial World – the Square. Then he is challenged by the symbol of the Grand Architect and the Celestial World – the Compasses, as he completes his journey through the Blue Lodge Degrees. Next he is challenged by the Chisel which, as we have seen, begins to hint at the internal world and the beautification of the work. He is now in symbolic possession of all the implements required to cut and prove the Keystone, for which his labors on the perfect ashlar are shown to be but a preparation. By mastering both himself and the lessons of the previous Degrees he is finally allowed to be touched by – or represent – the Keystone, that Peculiar Stone which completes the Temple, whose base is firmly seated on a terrestrial foundation, and whose cap or ‘cape’ extends upwards like a rainbow, striving towards the heavens. And upon this Peculiar Stone is written a Name...

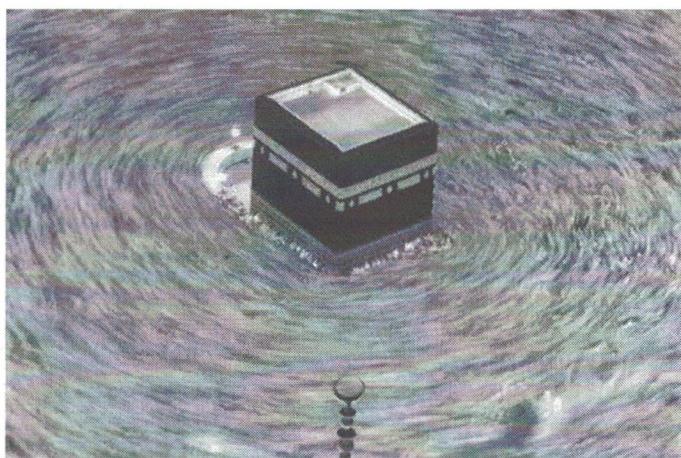


Figure 52 - Moslems circumambulating around the Ka'aba

This time he circumambulates, or circles six times clockwise about the Altar, pausing before the Right Worshipful Master each time to salute with the sign and due guard of each ascending Degree. At each circumambulation the Chaplains recites verses from Psalm 24, which tradition says “accompanied a ceremony of the entry of God (invisibly enthroned upon the Ark) into the Temple.” (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops).

Now the number six – and the number seven – have great symbolic significance in the Bible. God created the heaven and the earth in six days, and on the seventh He rested. In our Ritual we perform six circumambulations, and the ceremony of completion ends with the placing of the Keystone signifying the work is done. We are told to remove our aprons. In other words, we rest. We have built our Temple in six days, and now man has been perfected, there is rest.

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The theme can also be seen in the Book of Joshua, when the Israelites circumambulate the city of Jericho in silence for six days, and on the seventh circumambulate seven times with shouting and noise. We can also see the movement in the Hajj, when Moslems circumambulate the Ka'aba – this time anticlockwise – seven times. In each Degree the Candidate has circumambulated, or walked in a circle, one extra time for each higher Degree. It should be recognized that in most religions and magical practices the act of circumambulating is symbolic of raising energy or rising to a higher plane. This is the principle, for example, behind walking labyrinths, which we can see in many cathedrals, as well as outdoor groves.



Figure 53 - Joshua and the Walls of Jericho

Once accomplished, the Candidate approaches the Altar to take the Obligation.

## The Obligation, Penalty, Grip and Word

Once the Candidate is in due form, the Companions gather in a circle about him, emphasizing that peculiar symbol of the point with a circle – now physically represented by the Altar and Candidate within the Fraternal Circle of his Brethren, just as the Brethren formed the Symbolic Temple in the Blue Lodge at the time of taking the Obligation. The Square has become a circle; and the Brethren now symbolize that circle first seen in the Mark Master Degree upon the Keystone.

The most important part of the Obligation, which otherwise follows the usual formula, is that of promising “to dispense true Masonic light and knowledge to my less informed Brethren to be best of my ability.” Having become proficient in the knowledge of all the preceding Degrees, the Brother promises to become a beacon, or a mirror, to reflect that Light and Knowledge upon other worthy Masons.

It is interesting that the penalty this time emphasizes the removal of the organs of physical life and their being thrown back onto the earth to rot (the term ‘dunghill’ is poetically used). In other Degrees an offending part of the anatomy was usually removed – for example, the right hand in the Mark Degree for improperly seeking wages not one’s due – but here the element is that of Earth. We will return to this later.

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The Grip is called the ‘Cover Grip’ since it covers, or includes, all the preceding grips (really it only covers the Entered Apprentice, Fellowcraft and Master Mason grips – but we shall see why in the section below called ‘Esoteric Implications’).

The Word, ‘Giblim’, means ‘Most Excellent Master’ according to the Geneva Bible, as we have read. As such the title means little in itself in the English language, since it is but an honorific, and is used in the preceding Degree. However, the Hebrew word ‘Rabboni’ makes a powerful statement. It is only used once in a footnote in the Old Testament, and but twice in the New Testament. It can also mean ‘My Great Master’, and is the term uttered by Mary Magdalene upon seeing the resuscitated Jesus. It was also used by the blind man in Mark 10:51 when he asks Jesus to restore his sight. We must remember that both Operative and Speculative Masonry developed in countries where Christianity was the predominant – if not sole – religion. It is hardly surprising, therefore to find this word taking on a much stronger meaning. So in the Bible the word is never actually used to indicate a good craftsman: it *is* used to indicate a man considered to be without sin; in this context the word becomes a very powerful statement indeed. Again, in many continental rituals of a Christian nature, Hiram becomes Christ, and of course one famous name for Christ is – the *Word*.

### The Completion of the Temple

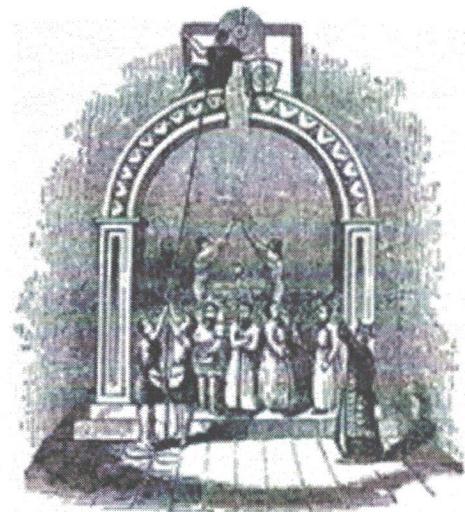


Figure 54 - The Keystone set in place

This theme has been comprehensively covered already. The only point to be made here is that the anthem tells us “to bring forth the cape-stone”. Now, the copestone, or capstone is the final stone which tops off a building. It is **not** the Keystone, for that *keys* an arch together. In most States the word has been modified to say ‘Keystone’. Albert Mackey, former General Grand High Priest, makes much of this point in his Monitor. Perhaps the confusion is deliberate: the Keystone has an important significance due to its shape, and its central position in the Arch, which has often been portrayed as holding up the canopy of heaven like the arch of Noah’s rainbow, perhaps therefore harking back to the Mark Mariner Degree, the stones forming the zodiacal signs between the Solstices which at one time marked the six monthly term of the Lodge Master in a

number of traditions. On the other hand the Capstone marks the true completion of a building, yet its shape is of little interest, since it could be just another rectangular ashlar.

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## Removal of Aprons

The removal of Aprons is a powerful symbol that we have come to the end of the Symbolic Degree cycle. It also represents that seventh day of rest, referred to above. Everything in this Degree emphasizes and stresses completion, and end of a cycle and the beginning of a new one. But to proceed from one cycle to the next it is important that one has learned the lessons of the previous one.

In the circumambulations of this Degree we were reminded of Creation. Indeed, many papers have been written linking the building of the Temple with the story of Creation. Consider again the number ‘seven’. The Temple was ‘seven years and upwards’ in its construction (in Leviticus 25:4 the seventh year is called a Sabbath, which was the day God rested). It was dedicated during the Feast of Tabernacles, a seven day festival held in the seventh month.

In the context of Creation, what could removing one’s aprons symbolize? Genesis 3:7 says: “And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves

together, and made themselves aprons.” Note that in this case the Geneva Bible is most definitely *not* referenced: it is also known as the ‘Breeches Bible’ since it says they made themselves breeches! So a key external symbol of man’s fall and imperfection is the wearing of the apron. Yet once the work upon ourselves is completed we remove the apron. We have in a way atoned – we have returned to our original, or primitive, state. We have created a Temple fit for the Lord to dwell in.

Once more we see a reference to the fact that we have completed the external work, and are now ready for the internal work which will be our task in the next level,

plane, or phase of our development.

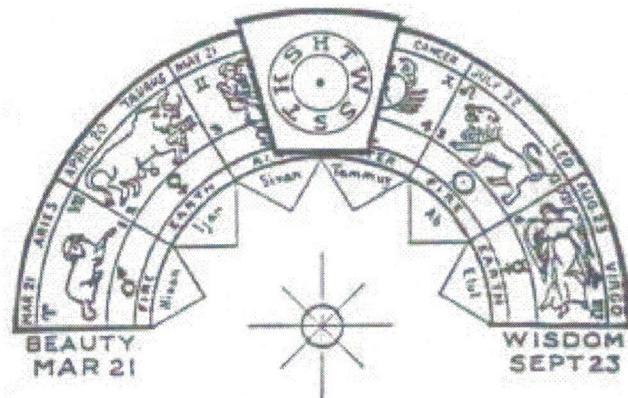


Figure 55 - Arch and Keystone related to the Zodiacial Signs



Figure 56 - Adam and Eve chased from Eden

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## The Reception

In this Degree there is no conferral of special secrets, nor any teachings to be imparted. It is assumed the Most Excellent Master already knows all he needs to, and this is more of a ‘Graduation Ceremony’. Therefore King Solomon and Hiram, King of Tyre do not confer a Degree, but rather greet the newly-Obligated Brethren, receiving and acknowledging them Most Excellent Masters.

But this is once more accomplished through touch. In every Degree, more or less subtle depending upon the source of the Ritual, there is a transmission, accomplished through a meeting of bodies, a handshake. Think how all rituals of transmission, adulthood, religious passage are always accompanied by the passing of a ‘certain something’ from the person who has it to the person who does not, by means of touch. We offer our hand “in token of friendship and Brotherly love”. We shake hands, we embrace, we kiss, we impose hands upon the head, and we anoint: all involve touching. This time the handshake is given and received as equals, not with one person kneeling. The acknowledgement is therefore of a peer.



Figure 57 - The acknowledgement of equality

## The Dedication of the Temple

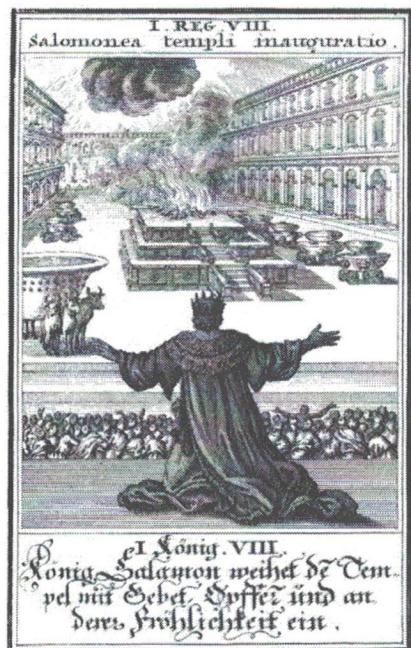


Figure 58 - Dedication of the Temple

The Dedication is almost completely made up of readings from II Chronicles Chapters 5 and 6. Those parts narrating history are usually given to the Chaplain, but the portentous prayer of King Solomon at the Dedication is put in his mouth and is followed by what used to be one of the most dramatic moments of all Freemasonry (prior to fire hazard laws, that is!).

Following the deposit of the Ark of the Covenant in its proper place, and the invocation by King Solomon, the sign of divine approbation – possibly even a sign of the Lord coming down to occupy the Mercy Seat – used to be a most dramatic pyrotechnic display used to visibly indicate the Shekinah coming down from heaven and igniting the incense. II Chronicles is a little more prosaic, telling us that “the house was filled with a cloud.”

This ‘fire from heaven’ is a common manifestation of communication between God and man. To give some example,

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Figure 59 - Elijah and the priests of Ba'al

think of the fire which lit the altar built by Abraham on which to sacrifice his son; the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the pillar of fire of the Exodus; the burning bush. Following this manifestation we have the fire Elijah summoned down on the guard and his fifty men, and of course the fire which descended to light the bituminous substance drawn up by the priests and laid upon the altar at the time of the Rededication of the Second Temple of Zerubbabel. Further, we have the tongues of fire which settled upon the Disciples. Each of these indicate a moment of communication between God and his creation. It also suggests that the Ark of the Covenant was someone inactive until that moment, in that the true sign of occupancy or divine approbation did not take place until the divine fire descended, and only then was the Holy of Holies truly filled with the glory of God. If the analogy between Man and the Temple as a type of Man is to be

maintained, then it is not until the divine breath or Word enters the body that it is vivified with the spirit.

Psalm 122 is then spoken antiphonally (i.e. alternating verses) between King Solomon and Hiram King of Tyre. This unusual treatment of the Psalm is more at home in religious services, where choirs often sing antiphonally (the two choirs being called *Cantoris*, or the side where the Cantor is seated, usually in the North, and *Decani*); or the congregation reads verses antiphonally with the priest. This could reflect the idea of speaking in tongues. When God communicated with Moses out of the burning bush, Moses complained he did not have the gift of rhetoric, and God appointed Aaron, his Brother, to speak for him. Similarly in the New Testament, when the fire descended the Disciples began to speak in tongues. Here, the words of peace are alternated between two Kings who, for one short moment, become one.

### The Address

The Address to the Candidate is most comprehensive and gives a detailed account of the ritual which preceded it. Perhaps the most interesting part is the last sentence, which is truly a harbinger of what will follow: "...that when we leave this, for that far distant country from whence we shall never return, we may there receive the wages of faithful craftsmen."

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We will not seek material wages in that distant land; for surely the only ‘wage’ we seek is the True Word? And yet we have to leave this land for that in order to receive it. At the Opening of Lodge the Senior Warden says he became a Master Mason “to obtain the Maser’s Word, travel in foreign lands, work and receive a Master’s wages?” But does he mean the *True* Word of Master Masons, and not the Substitute Word? Could this mean he has to travel to a far distant country in order to obtain that Word? And we know that far distant country from whence we shall never return is across the veil of death. Must we die, then, before we can learn the Truth?

## The Temple as Creation / The Temple as Man

The building of the Temple holds much deeper symbolism than providing useful tools for us to consider when trying to improve ourselves.

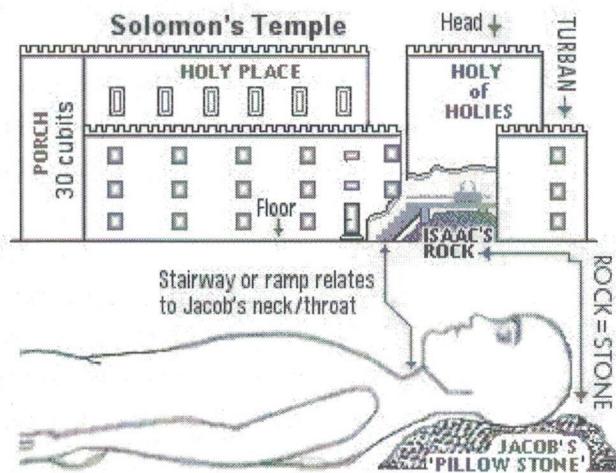


Figure 60 - by Tony Badillo (see [www.templesecrets.info](http://www.templesecrets.info))

x 5 times), earth (21 times), heavens (21 times), and “God saw that it was good” (7 times). There are parallels to the construction of the Tabernacle, since this process also lasted ‘7’ days. There are also key correspondences between the two processes. As well as many of the Hebrew phrases being almost identical in both stories, some of the individual days also show similarities. For example, God created the sea on the third day; and in the construction of the Tabernacle, the bronze laver or molten ‘sea’ was built on the third day. Similarly Moses stressed the importance of the Sabbath for Israel on the seventh day, just as Genesis tells us how God rested on the seventh day.

One may also be struck that Solomon’s Temple took seven years to build (the number ‘7’ is important here as a symbol: in religious books days, months, years and centuries are often less important than the number attributed). The seventh year is called a ‘Sabbath’. The dedication took place during the seven day Festival of Tabernacles, which fell in the seventh month of the Jewish

Many religious commentators, both Jewish and Christian, have been struck by the parallel between the story of Creation in Genesis and the building of the Temple in 2 Chronicles. Once more the number ‘7’ is highlighted. In his paper *Creation as Temple-Building and Work as Liturgy in Genesis 1-3* by Jeff Morrow of Seton Hall University, he notes that Genesis 1:1 contains ‘7’ words in Hebrew. Genesis 1:2 has fourteen – ‘7 x 2’. Other important words in the text may be counted in multiples of ‘7’, including God (35 or 7

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Figure 61- 'Transfiguration' by Cornelis Monsma

calendar. King Solomon's speech included seven petitions; and Solomon was instructed to build the Temple rather than David because Solomon was a man of peace, as his name *shlomoh* implies. These numbers were not selected at random, the repeatedly emphasize that fact that the Temple construction as viewed as a new creation, and therefore the completed Temple a 'microcosm' of the world, which in symbolic form, tried to recreate the Garden of Eden prior to the Fall, when all was perfect and God dwelt in the midst of the Garden, in Eden; just as He now dwelt in the *Sanctum Sanctorum*, hidden behind a veil decorated with pomegranates and cherubim.

How more tragic, then, that the next prevarication of man resulted in the same fate: the departure of God, the razing of the Temple and man expelled into exile once more.

However, the word 'microcosm' brings us to a second symbol of the Temple: that of perfect – or regenerated – man. The Kabbalah teaches us that God wished to see Himself face to face, to gaze upon His reflection. And so He created Adam Kadmon in His image and likeness, and placed him in Eden. But man heeded the voices of the tempters, and believing himself as powerful as God attempted his own act of creation, but only resulted in enmiring himself in the very mud from which he was trying to create another being, and became covered with a layer or slime – or flesh. So perfect man is hidden beneath a coating of sin, and must learn to perfect himself in order to cast off this earthly coating, and reveal his true form, his Glorious Body, to rejoin with the Godhead. To do this he must recognize the Truth about himself.

In this Degree this image is most powerfully put across by the fact that there are in fact *two* completions. During the procession the Keystone is carried in and placed. This completes the physical structure of the Temple. The outer vehicle is finished. To emphasize this point, after the second procession the aprons are removed. In terms of the Creation, the body is now formed. Man exists, but he is still nothing more than an empty shell.

Now the *second* completion takes place. The Ark of the Covenant is brought in and 'safely seated.' God once again shows His approbation in air. At the Creation God breathed life into the inert dross by exhaling the breath of life into Adam. This time God's spirit, or Shekinah, descends from the heavens and fills the Temple, inflating it into life. Now I stress that this is a personal *exegesis* or interpretation drawn from the actual text:

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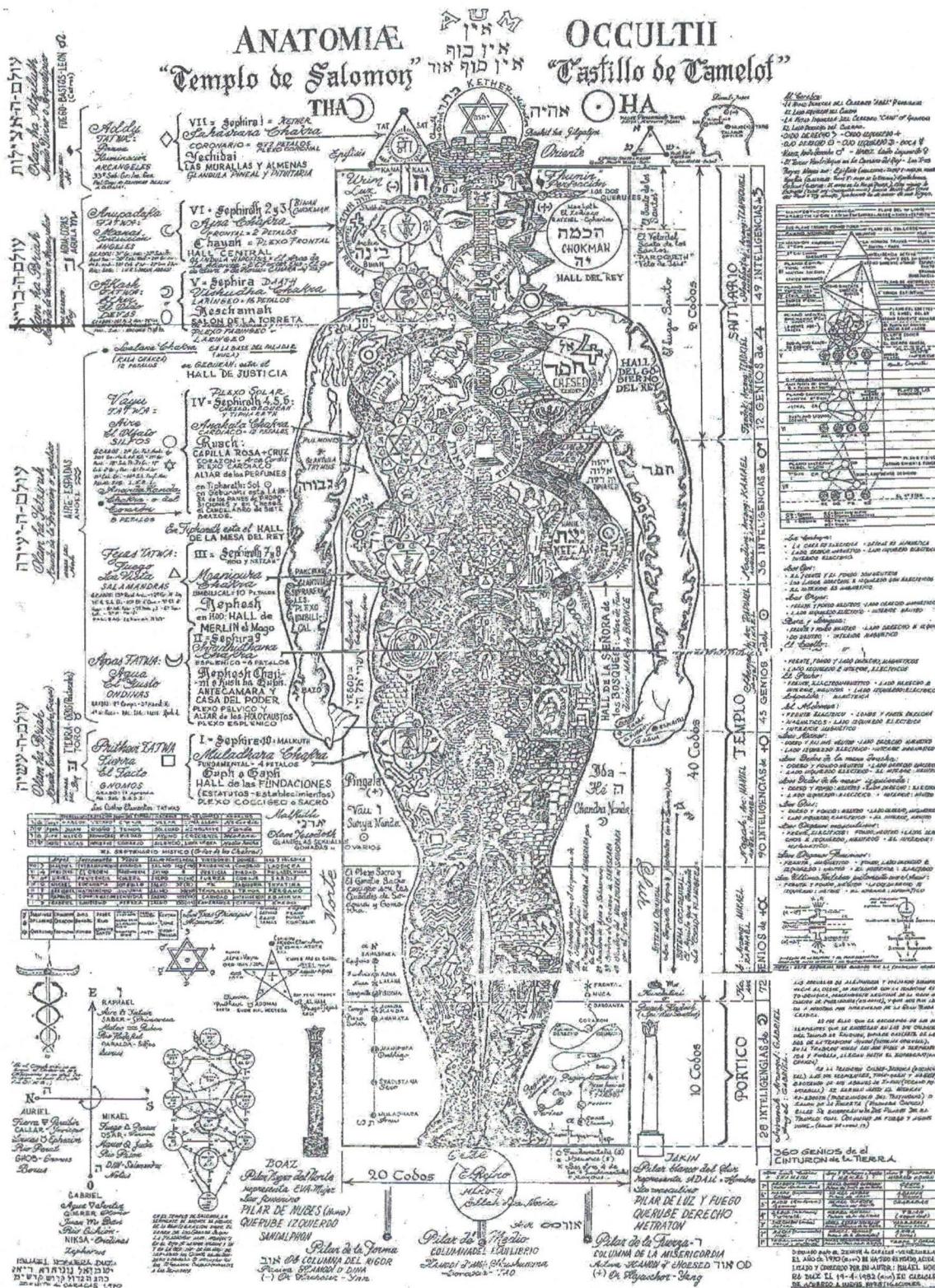


Figure 62 - A complex diagram equating Adam Kadmon to King Solomon's Temple and Camelot!

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"Now when Solomon had made an end of praying, the fire came down from heaven, and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices; and the glory of the Lord filled the house. And the priests could not enter into the house of the Lord, because the glory of the Lord had filled the Lord's house." (2 Chronicles 7, verses 1 and 2).

My reading of this passage is that the fire came down to consume the sacrifices, but the Glory of the Lord is mentioned separately – and several times in the text which follows – suggesting it is something different, not fire. After all, if fire had filled the temple it would have melted all the gold and fused the precious stones, and immolated the priests and Levites! However, if we accepted that His Glory was found in the element of air, then this makes more sense. God's presence is frequently represented by fire if He is wrathful, but by air or wind if His approbation has been given to a project.

For me it is a powerful image to see God entertaining the masses in the outer Courtyard with impressive displays of pyrotechnics; while inside the Temple He manifests Himself in a mighty wind against which the priests and Levites have to brace themselves, and the curtains before the Ark are blown open and the incense swirls about the Sanctum Sanctorum, before the Shekinah finally comes to settle between the outstretched wings of the cherubim. And thus God breathes life into the Temple.

But I stress again this is only one interpretation of the Biblical passage, and readers are encouraged to draw their own conclusions.

Finally after the plethora of 'sevens' mentioned in the text, it almost comes as a relief to read 2 Chronicles 7 Verse 9:

"And in the eighth day they made a solemn assembly: for they kept the dedication of the altar seven days, and the feast seven days."

After the cycle of creation and the day of rest which had been spent in joyous celebration, we reach the number 'eight', the number of renewal and new beginnings. We see the tone of this eighth day is solemn following the joy of the previous week. For life goes on, and Day 1 of life with *God-With-Us* now begins. For us it is Day 1 of our spiritual rebirth, and the first day in a new journey along the Masonic path.

The First Temple was also seen as a symbol for Man, with the Holy of Holies his Head, or Spirit; the Holy Place his Heart, Soul or Chest; and the Outer Courts his Body, Abdomen or Genitalia (one might make a case for the Two Pillars being his legs. While not wishing to do more than mention this concept now, it is nevertheless important to realize that the Temple was seen, even when the narrative was originally being written, as far more than a simple tale about the erection

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of a lovely building. Even then it was seen as representing a microcosm of creation, and a microcosm of all that man should aspire to in order to perfect himself, in preparation for reunion with God.



Figure 63 - The Torah

In support of this, although tradition informs us that the five books of Moses, the Torah, were written by Moses himself, modern theologians date the writing of the Torah which exists today – which no doubt existed in oral, and perhaps written form for many centuries before this – as being during the period of exile in Babylon, when the priests, having no idea how long their exile would last, wished to ensure that their traditions, beliefs and regulations would not be lost to the new generations being born in Babylon with no link or knowledge of the land of their ancestors.

### Esoteric Implications

There are many lessons to draw from this impressive and educational Degree. Many have been alluded to already. For the present, we will limit ourselves to one: the penalties of the Degrees.

Many comments have been made about the penalties, whether they were ever carried out (as the anti-Masons like to think); whether they should explicitly be said to be only symbolic; whether they should be omitted altogether as they have been, for example, in Ireland. However, this misses the point that the penalties are – just as the rest of the Rituals are – allegories which use powerful and visceral symbols to transmit important teachings.

The road to the Royal Arch in the York Rite system really comprises *four* preceding Degrees, the Entered Apprentice, Fellowcraft, Master Mason and Most Excellent Master. The Mark Master and Past Master are really side Degrees, appended to the Fellowcraft and Master Mason Degree respectively. There are four *real* steps to the Degree of Royal Arch. We may speculate this was a process being introduced into the English System, too, particularly within the Antient rituals; but that the process broke down when politics intervened to crush their natural and organic development through the Act of Union in 1813.



Figure 64 - Count Cagliostro, founder of the Rite of Memphis

## CAPITULAR DEVELOPMENT COURSE

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The penalty of Most Excellent Master, when taken along with those of Entered Apprentice, Fellowcraft and Master Mason, cover the four ancient elements. Trial by element is a concept which goes back to the Ancient Mystery Schools, and is still practiced in some Masonic Rituals, including those of Memphis-Mizraïm, the Scottish Rite and Willermoz' Scottish Rectified Rite. It can also be witnessed in the biennial conferral of the Entered Apprentice Degree by Garibaldi Lodge No. 542 under the authority of the Grand Lodge of New York F. & A.M.

- In the Entered Apprentice Degree the tongue is removed and buried in **Water**.
- In the Fellowcraft Degree the heart and lungs are removed and left as prey to the vultures of the **Air**.
- In the Master Mason Degree the bowels are removed and burned to ashes (with **Fire**).
- In the Most Excellent Master Degree *all* the internal organs are removed (the ‘vitals’) and thrown on a dunghill (**Earth**).

This is a powerful Rosicrucian concept and reflects true spiritual alchemy. Writers from early alchemists to Carl Jung have written about the need to deconstruct the body in order to understand and balance its elements, in order to create a perfect abode for the spirit to enter. It appears that Freemasonry may have picked something up from the Rosicrucians, after all.

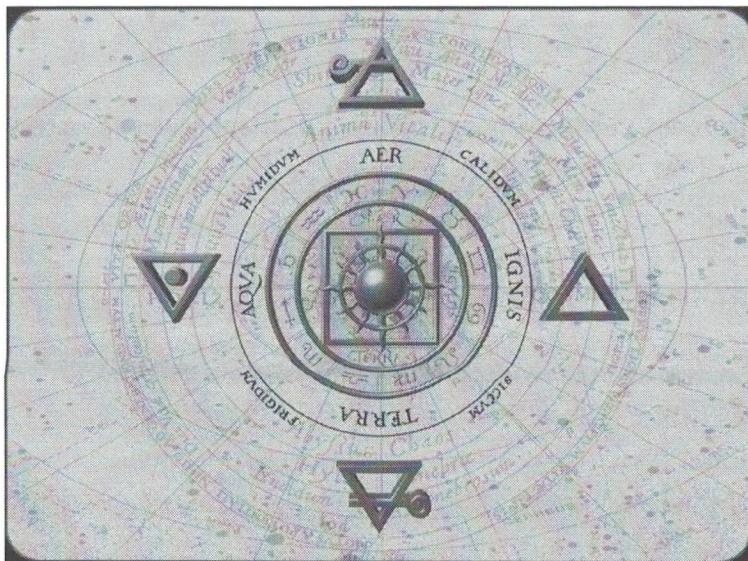


Figure 65 - The Four Classical Elements

# CAPITULAR DEVELOPMENT COURSE

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## MEM Discussion Questions

- 1 What is your opinion of removing your aprons as part of this Degree? Do you think you should remove aprons in a Lodge, when we are taught always to be clothed in Lodge? Does it violate the Constitutions? Does the end (i.e. to teach a lesson) justify the means?
- 2 Do you think the Degree system would be as effective without the Most Excellent Master Degree? We know that it doesn't exist in England, for existence, as part of the Capitular experience. In your opinion, what does its presence add to the York Rite?
- 3 The text examined the symbolism of the Elements in the penalties associated with the Degrees in some depth. In the Third Degree you were presented with a number of symbols, for example the Hourglass, the Beehive, the Anchor and the Ark, and were given some explanations of their meanings. Do you think that was all they might represent?

At the Completion of the Temple a large number of vessels and objects were carried up into the Temple. The Key ones, some of which we will again encounter in the Royal Arch Degree include the horned Altar of Holocausts (or Sacrifice), the Sea or Laver of Brass, the Seven-Branched Candelabra, the Altar of Incense, the Table of Shewbread (bearing twelve loaves of unleavened bread, and wine), and the Ark of the Covenant. Can you think of what any or all of these vessels and equipment might symbolize in this analogy?

- 4 Do you think the Most Excellent Master Degree was written merely to fill a gap in the narrative about the Temple, or do you think it was written with a higher purpose in mind?

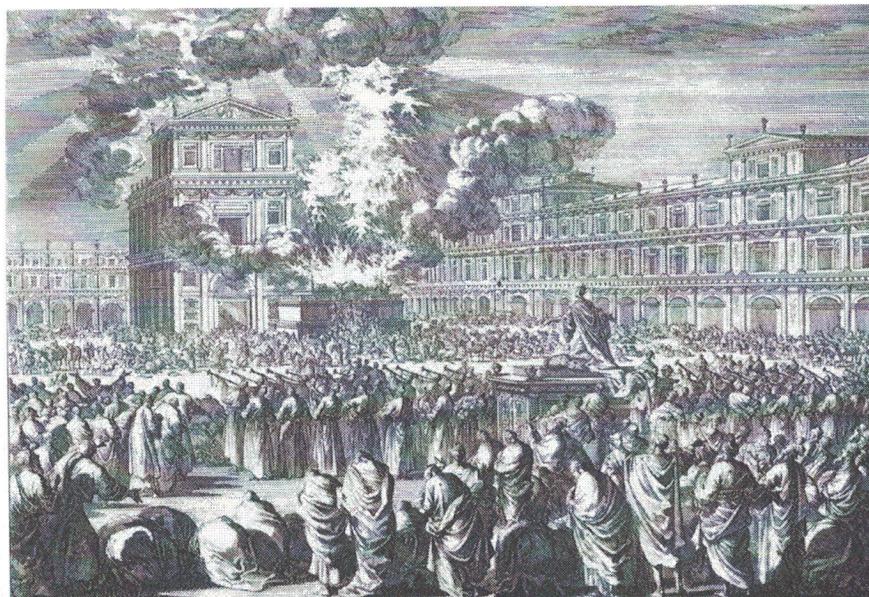


Figure 66 - Engraving of the Dedication of the Temple, with the fire descending from Heaven