

The
CRYPTIC RITE
of
FREEMASONRY



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THE CRYPTIC RITE

No Rite of Freemasonry has come into its own in recent years so much as the series of degrees known as the **Cryptic Rite**. And its popularity is well deserved, for there are no more beautiful degrees in all Freemasonry than those conferred in the Councils of Royal and Select Masters.

There are many reasons for its popularity. In the first place it is the completion of a story — of a Masonic allegory. It is the Story of the Preservation of a Word! Symbolic Freemasonry treats of the Loss of a Word. Royal Arch Masonry teaches of its Discovery. And Cryptic Masonry teaches of its Preservation, thus rounding out the **Story of the Word** and completing the Story of Ancient Craft Masonry.

Only those degrees dealing with the Word may be regarded as true Freemasonry. Hence, the degree of Entered Apprentice, Fellowcraft, Mark Master, Most Excellent Master, and Super Excellent Master are not true Craft degrees, although contained in systems which are essentially Craft Masonry.

ORIGIN OF DEGREES

Like many of the Masonic Degrees, the degrees of the Cryptic Rite are shrouded in mystery. Like Topsy, in Uncle Tom's Cabin, they "just grew." But they have attained a lusty growth and one out of every two Royal Arch Masons is a Cryptic Mason. In recent years its growth, in percentages, has far out-run other Masonic groups.

Until a few years ago, Cryptic Masonry was not a series of degrees which one had to take to reach the Shrine — or the Order of the Temple. However in recent years a large number of Grand Commanderies have made the Cryptic degrees prerequisite for the Templar orders, and it appears that even more Grand Commanderies will adopt this policy in the immediate years ahead.

About a century and a half ago, the degrees of Royal Master and Select Master appeared as from nowhere. Masonic Lecturers throughout the East were conferring them upon representative Masons, while engaged in instructing in Craft and Capitular degrees. Even one Supreme Council of the Scottish Rite included the degree of Select Master as one of its "detached" degrees. But such beautiful degrees were not to remain "detached" for any length of time, and, in the 1870's, a General Grand Council was formed for the United States, which today numbers most of the Grand Councils in this country, as well as the Western section of Canada.

The Vault and the Mysteries

All Biblical students and archaeologists know of the vaults underneath King Solomon's Temple; they exist there even at this late day. Whether these vaults were associated with the conferring of Masonic degrees, we seriously doubt; but the legend of the secret vault persists throughout Freemasonry.

Ancient initiation into the Mysteries is known to have involved the use of underground caves, tunnels, or vaults. It was the Greek poet, Pindar, who said:

"Happy is the man who descends beneath the hollow earth, having beheld these mysteries, for he knows the end as well as the divine origin of life, and thrice happy are they who descend to the shades after having beheld these sacred rites, for they alone have life in Hades while all other suffer there every kind of evil."

And Mackey, writing of the vault, says:

"The vault was, therefore, in the ancient mysteries, symbolic of the grave; for initiation was symbolic of death, where alone Divine Truth is to be found. Freemasons have adopted the same idea.

They teach that death is but the beginning of Life; that if the first, or evanescent Temple of our transitory life be on the surface, we must descend into the secret vault of death before we can find that sacred deposit of Truth, which is to adorn our second Temple of Eternal Life."

The Name — Cryptic

The degrees of the York or American Rite are classified as Symbolic (Craft), Capitular (Chapter), Cryptic (Council) and Chivalric (Commandery). The Cryptic Rite derives its claim to the word Cryptic because the scene of the degrees of Royal and Select Master is laid in the underground crypt beneath the Solomonic Temple. The word "cryptic" means "hidden," hence its use in describing these degrees. The last of the series of Cryptic degrees is not cryptic — because it does not comply with the requirement of a vault degree. It might be regarded as one of the Cryptic Rite's "detached degrees" for it has no connection either in history or symbolism with those of Royal and Select Master, as we shall see later.

The Royal Master

This is the first degree of the Cryptic system as conferred in the United States. Candidates who receive the degree are impressed with its dignified ritual and teachings, for it contains one section which is quite generally regarded as an outstanding piece of ritualistic work when properly given.

The lecture of the degree is explanatory of the articles contained in the Holy of Holies of the Temple, including the Ark of the Covenant, a knowledge of which is essential to those who would fully understand the preceding degrees. The principal characters in the degree are Solomon and his royal associates.

The Select Master

The degree of Select Master has not always been associated with that of Royal Master. Jeremy Cross is given credit by most writers for having combined the two degrees into one Rite.

There is strong evidence to support the theory that the degree came from a similar degree of the ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite — the degree of Intimate Secretary, or Grand Tiler of King Solomon. At any rate the legend of the degree is an old one whatever may have been its origin.

The scene of this degree is also laid in an underground vault and the events which characterize the degree are stirring enough to make it one of intense interest. The lecture contains the story of the degree without any further explanation, and the degree is said to "complete the Circle of Perfection" in Ancient Craft Masonry, for having received the degrees of Ancient Craft Masonry as contained in Lodge, Chapter, and Council, the recipient has received all the instruction which is offered by the Ancient Craft.

The Super-Excellent Master

As we have stated, the degree of Super-Excellent Master is not a degree of the Crypt; it does not deal with Ancient Craft Masonry, but it does deal with a period of history in which all Freemasons are interested—the period following the destruction of the First Temple. The essence of the degree is foretold in a lecture of the Royal Arch degree, when the Principal Sojourner refers to the Biblical reference "Zedekiah was one and twenty days old when he began to reign, and he did that which was evil in sight of the Lord, etc."

In our estimation, and we have seen a hundred or more Masonic degrees, the degree of Super-Excellent Master, as conferred in certain jurisdictions today, is the best devised, most impressive, and beautiful ritual we have yet seen. In a panorama of exciting events,

Biblical characters move across the stage driving home the historical facts of the Holy Bible in a way that nothing else can. Here Nebuchadnezzar lives again; Zedekiah proves the results of infidelity; Ezekiel and Jeremiah prophesy the promises of the Almighty.

Cryptic Rites in Other Countries

The Cryptic Rite is widespread, although governing bodies exist only in England, Scotland, Canada, and the United States.

In England the Cryptic degrees are controlled by a Grand Council of the Cryptic degrees. Among the degrees in the English system are:

- Most Excellent Master
- Royal Master
- Select Master
- Super-Excellent Master

In Scotland, the Supreme Grand Royal Arch Chapter has jurisdiction over the Cryptic Council degrees, the Royal Ark Mariner degree, the Knights of the East, and the Knights of the East and West; bodies of the Cryptic Rite are attached to Chapters. In this series of degrees, we find:

Lodges and Council:

- Royal Ark Mariner
- Commander Noah
- Babylonian Pass or Red Cross
- Knight of the Sword
- Knight of the East
- Knight of the East and West
- Chief and President

Cryptic Rite:

- Royal Master
- Select Master
- Super-Excellent Master
- Thrice Illustrious Master

It is interesting to note that while Scotland received the first three degrees of the last series from American sources, the degree of Thrice Illustrious Master, taken over recently in this country, was of Scottish origin.