

# The Degree of Most Excellent Master



Issued by the

Educational Research Committee

Of the

GRAND CHAPTER OF ROYAL ARCH MASONS OF MINNESOTA

## **The Degree of MOST EXCELLENT MASTER**

### **- HISTORICAL –**

The degree of Most Excellent Master, the third of the Capitular degrees according to our procedure, presents the completion and dedication of the Temple of Solomon, using some of the richest of setting and symbolism to be found in Masonry, and it is designed to fit the candidate, mentally and spiritually, for exaltation to the Royal Arch. Fortunate is the Chapter which has the personnel and equipment necessary to confer this degree at its best. But earnest effort, and thorough and careful preparation, even with limited equipment, will make the degree and impressive experience for the candidate, and one, long to be remembered.

We cannot claim for this degree any great antiquity. It was probably the last of the four degrees to come into the Chapter series, and was originally obscure. It has been ascribed to Thomas Smith Webb who was installed as High Priest at the organization of Temple Chapter Albany, New York, in 1797, and was one of the active leaders in the organization of the “Grand Royal Arch Chapter of the Northern States of America” in 1798. The degree is mentioned in his “Monitor,” published in 1797 and therefore some, taking this as the earliest mention, have thought him to have been its author. But there is evidence of the conferring of the degree before these dates, and even before Webb was made a Royal Arch Mason (in 1796). It was evidently worked by Hiram Chapter No. 1, of Connecticut, or at least by Hiram Mark Lodge, (later incorporated into the Chapter) which was chartered May 18, 1791. It was also listed as one of the degrees in the charter of Providence Chapter, dated September 3, 1793, and was conferred in Jerusalem Chapter, No. 3, of Philadelphia, at least as early as November 5, 1796. Behind these dates we have been unable to go.

## - SYMBOLS –

The central and greatest symbol of the degree is the Temple itself. From his first entrance into the lodge until he is made a Master Mason, and again in the Mark Master degree, the candidate is taught that he is erecting a Temple, and that the ancient Temple of Solomon is but a symbol of the Temple of his inner or spiritual life. Up to this point, however the Temple has never been completed; the chief architect is no longer at his task and the work is unfinished. But as a matter of fact the original Temple was completed and dedicated, and for generations used as a center of the worship of God. Surely one of the degrees of Masonry should present the dramatic events of its consecration, and this has been done in our relatively modern and strictly American degree of Most Excellent Master, the only degree in any Masonic rite in which these events are set forth. This completion of the Temple is the very thing which the Entered Apprentice set out to do in the beginning of his Masonic life. Only now has he attained the goal; and this furnishes one of the strongest arguments for the capitular degrees.

The Temple is the symbol of the reality and presence of God with man, and of the worship and service which should follow on the part of man. This great idea passed into the consciousness of the Christian world, and the very name of the ancient building was included in the title of a great religious order among the Crusaders, and is incorporated in that of our own Masonic Christian Knighthood of today. But if the Temple is a symbol of the individual man in his relation to God. And this idea is also very ancient. St. Paul writes to the church at Corinth: “know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you? If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy; for the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are” (I Cor. 3:16-17). And this Temple of his life the Mason is constantly building; it is never entirely completed on this earth and the material side of it must eventually crumble into dust, yet “we are persuaded that if we have

erected the Temple of our inner life by square, plumbline and rule, its foundation shall never fail, and its fabric shall never crumble or decay.”

Based upon the main and central symbol of the Temple, there appear in this degree several lesser symbols, which have special meaning for Masons. The Keystone, so prominently presented in the Mark Master degree, here appears again, and in a position of honor and importance. He who shaped the stone is absent; his place is vacant, but his work is here, and by it the structure is completed. The meaning is evident for all, but for us who are Christians it is especially suggestive. Our Master, to whom the Keystone indirectly referred in a previous degree, no longer walks the earth, but His Spirit and power still complete and crown human lives and make them fit for the worship and service of God. Without His work our spiritual building would be forever incomplete.

The more detailed symbols of the service of dedication had special significance for the Hebrew people of long ago and much of their meaning is equally valid for us today. The censer in the hand of the High Priest teaches us that the Temple, and also our own personal lives, must be thoroughly purified of evil before God can enter in. The holy incense of prayer must fit life for the highest service. The holy vessels and the shew-bread, as long ago, represent our gifts and sacrifices to God, and the light of the candlestick his illumination of our lives. The ark, as we know from many sources, is the symbol of His presence in the Holy of Holies, and the flame descending from the Heaven to consume the offering is the crowning sign of His presence and blessing. The labor of the people, from the least to the greatest, is approved, and the completed Temple now consecrated by the King's prayer is ready for the continuous worship of the Most High for generations to come. By a similar process must our inner lives be consecrated to Him.

“While Masonry is not a religion or a church, while it is neither the rival of, nor the substitute for, the Church of God, and in the strongest way repudiates any such claim made for it; it is nonetheless deeply and helpfully religious in its ceremonies and teaching.” This religious note, which has been present as a sort of underone in preceding degrees, appears as the dominant note in the degree of Most Excellent Master. It is the most intensely religious degree of the series and it should always be conferred with reverence and solemnity, never with the aim of merely spectacular display. One of the first lessons received by the candidate in Masonry is reverence for holy things, and surely this degree should especially be conferred – and received – in that spirit.

The glory and dignity of human life at its best are vividly taught in this degree. As the Temple stood unique in architectural excellence and glory as compared with other structures, so stands man, in contrast to all other created beings on earth. But as with the Temple, so with man, the truest glory is not exterior and visible, but within, that beauty of character which is the true man, whose breadth of sympathy and love embraces all, whose heart is as a sanctuary, pure as the Altar, and whose life and conduct are a daily sacrifice to the Most High.

But this degree not only teaches us our relation to God. It inculcates some very practical lessons regarding our relations with our fellow men. We are to share true Masonic light and knowledge with the uninformed (and we must have it ourselves before we can share it!), we are to preserve the high standard of our own lives, but we are never to belittle others, nor disparage or detract from the character of a brother. No longer is the emphasis only, or chiefly upon self-development. The real purpose of it all is that we should dedicate the fruits of our labor, not only to the glory of God, but to the good of our fellow man. We are to make the pathway of our brethren clearer as a result of our experience and knowledge; we are not to judge them for their faults, and surely never are we to derogate, or “run them down” in our conversations with others, but rather to display toward them that supreme virtue which

“thinketh no evil,” which “hopeth all things,” “suffereth long and is kind.” How easy it is to lose our tempers, to be critical, unkind or even grossly unjust! And how hard for some of us to constantly dispense light, and not darkness! If we are truly working forward toward the completion and dedication of our spiritual Temple, our work will find everyday expression in our lives, not only in Masonic circles, but outside as well.

The candidate has now passed through the three preparatory Chapter degrees, and is prepared to receive and appreciate the Royal Arch. In the Mark Master degree he has learned diligence in work and unselfish and fraternal assistance in practical life. In the Past Master’s degree he has been taught obedience to law and the responsibility involved in ruling others. In the degree of Most Excellent Master he has seen exemplified the completion and dedication of the Temple, and has been inspired to make his life a true Temple, and to let its beneficent influence flow out to others. But every earthly building must eventually crumble, and the Temple of Solomon was no exception. After approximately four hundred years, the southern Jewish kingdom fell, under the attacks of the Babylonians, the temple was destroyed, and its holy vessels and other treasures, together with most of the people, were carried into a foreign land. Their lot seemed indeed hopeless, but after two generations the more liberal policy of certain of the rulers of the Persians, who in the meantime had conquered the Babylonians, together with the stirring appeals of the Hebrew prophets, set the stage for the return of a considerable number of the people, and for the rebuilding of the Temple. These important events, the long and arduous journey from Babylonia to Jerusalem, and the first steps necessary toward the rebuilding of the House of the Lord, furnish the atmosphere for the Royal Arch degree, and in these events the candidate finds himself taking a central active part.

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