ROYAL AND SELECT MASTER DEGREES

--- HISTORICAL ---

The Cryptic Council gets its name from the reference to the underground crypt or hidden chamber or vault beneath the Temple built by King Solomon. The word cryptic means hidden or secret, hence the name Cryptic Degrees.

The history of the Cryptic Council Degrees is very convoluted and confusing filled with a number of theories as to just how they came into existence. This publication will cover both the Royal Master and the Select Master degrees because their history is so intertwined that they are not easily separated. The Super Excellent is a far different degree and will be dealt with in a separate booklet.

There are at least four theories on how the Royal and Select Master degrees developed and they include but are not limited to the Stuart Theory, the Baltimore Theory, the Scottish Rite Theory, the European or Berlin Theory and there may be more. To make things even more confusing each of these theories holds some truths and some conjecture, exaggerations and even wild speculation. In this booklet we will provide a very brief overview of each theory simply to give the reader a place to start their own research.

**The Stuart Theory**

This theory is based on the Stuart dynasty of Scotland and England and the attempts by Bonnie Prince Charles to restore the English Crown to his family. Some believe that the Cryptic Council was formed as a cover for his plot to seize the Throne.

**The Baltimore Theory**

Baltimore, Maryland was a Masonic hot spot in the 19th century and had a “Grand Council” that was conferring degrees prior to 1810. Companion Thomas Lowndes and fifteen other Royal Arch Masons formed Columbian Grand Council No. 1, Royal Master Masons on September 2, 1810 and began conferring degrees. Where and when Companion Lowndes received his Royal Master Degree is unknown.

**The Scottish Rite Theory**

The Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite (AASR) emerged in France and found its way to the American Colonies by way of Charleston, South Carolina. At that time several prominent members of the AASR were in possession of detached degrees, referred to as *Cryptic Degrees*, which they communicated to other Brothers. The oldest documented evidence of these *Cryptic* *Degrees* being conferred is a record of the degree of Select Master (Select Master of Twenty Seven) being conferred on November 8, 1790 by Grand Inspector General Moses Cohen.

**The European or Berlin Theory**

The Berlin Theory alleges that the Cryptic Degrees came out of the southern region of Bordeaux, France at the same time as the Scottish Rite degrees, during the mid-seventeen hundreds, the 1740s to the 1760s. In Berlin they found one of their greatest supporters, King Fredrick II the Great of Prussia. From Berlin they found their way, along with the AASR, to the American Colonies.

**The Cryptic Degrees in the United States**

The debate on the actual origins of the Cryptic Degrees goes on. However, one can with some confidence say that the Degrees came to the United States by way of Baltimore, MD and Charleston, SC at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries. At first the Royal and Select were not combined into one system, each was being conferred by separate bodies and under different jurisdictions. The Selected is the older of the two having first appeared in the 1760s (as part of the Scottish Rite) and it is claimed under a Council of Select Masters in Baltimore in 1792. We know for a fact that a Grand Council of Royal Masters (Columbian No. 1) was organized in 1810 in New York. Jeremy Cross combined the two degrees under one system in 1818, and between 1817 and 1829 Cryptic Councils began to appear on the east coast in Connecticut, Virginia, North Carolina and Maryland. Massachusetts conferred their first Cryptic degrees in 1817 and formed a Grand Council in 1826. General Grand Council was formed in the United States during the 1870’s and today it is the governing body of most Grand Councils within the United States and much of Western Canada.

No matter what its origin or the identity of its founder it is easy to see that the Cryptic Council was fully functional and conferring degrees by the early part of the 19th century. Like Masonry itself the Cryptic Degrees have continued to expand their influence and play an important role in the development and education of York Rite Masons.

The first two degrees, the Royal Master and the Select Master, are sometimes referred to as the Degrees of Preservation. This is because they are based around the preservation of the Word for future generations. The backstory of the first two Cryptic Rite degrees is based on the Book of Enoch. Enoch, the great grand-father of Noah (as in Noah’s Ark) was informed by God that the world would be destroyed once by water and once by fire. In an effort to preserve the accumulated knowledge of mankind Enoch constructed two pillars. One of stone, to resist water, and one of brick, to resist fire, he also constructed a vault. On the pillars he inscribed mankind’s knowledge of the arts and sciences. The vault was built similar to a well, a vertical shaft, consisting of nine arches, at the bottom of the vault Enoch deposited a number of items which are enumerated in the Most Excellent Master degree of the Royal Arch.

The Royal and Select Master degrees portray a Fellowcraft in search of more light. Our Grand Master Hiram Abif is still alive and is teaching to the candidates the sublime lesson of a useful and productive life on earth and a worthy end to that life. The degree is broken into three short sections. The first is the optional prologue which discusses and explains the events.

Section two takes place in the Sanctum Sanctorum of the Temple where our Grand Master Hiram talks about death. We are also introduced to a new character in freemasonry, who the candidate now represents. Adoniram, who was the chief of the Fellowcraft, and oversaw the cutting of the cedars of Lebanon used in the construction of the Temple. He was also the tax collector for King Solomon.

In section three the Candidate is obligated and given the signs and words and made familiar with the furnishing of the Sanctum Sanctorum and the details of the Ark of the Covenant.

ROYAL MASTER DEGREE

--- SYMBOLS ---

The broken triangle: The triangle is symbolic of the Deity however, the broken triangle is symbolic of our three Grand Masters and the loss of Grand Master Hiram. The Royal Master degree is said to have been a memorial to Grand Master Hiram

The sword and the trowel are symbolic of the workmen and their willingness to defend and rebuild the City and the Temple.

Alpha and Omega are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet and symbolic of the beginning and the end.

The nine arches: There are many ways you can interpret the nine arches. One way is by simply looking at the meaning of the number nine and another is to look at the nine arches as a whole.

In the Bible the number nine symbolizes divine completeness and conveys the meaning of finality. Indicating that when we complete or enter into the ninth arch our earthly work or journey is completed and it is time to cross over. In numerology the number nine represents universal love, eternity, faith, finality and more. The meaning of finality is probably arrived at in part because nine is the last single digit. You can also look at nine as eight plus one. Eight being the number of eternity, in that a lazy eight (an eight laying on its side) is the symbol of eternity and nine the symbol of finality.

Some believe that Solomon’s Temple represents the human body, the columns representing the legs, the main chamber the body, the inner chamber the head and the Ark of the Covenant the brain and or mind. In the same way the nine arches may represent our journey to self-discovery.

As fellowcrafts we are told in Blue lodge that there are secrets contained in the inner chamber, and the holy of holies. Now as Cryptic Masons the fellowcraft’s journey continues thru the nine arches and we find that the journey is taking us to our own inner chamber, our personal sanctum sanctorum, our soul, in order for us to discover the Devine spirit residing within ourselves, developing and deepening our relationship with God.

Finally, how do the nine arches relate to the Tree of Life? That is a question we will look into that later in the Mentor and Advanced Studies program.

**Points to Ponder**

* That every man must labor at building his own spiritual temple. The work of gaining spiritual knowledge is your labor here on earth.
* The burial of the Lost Word signifies that man can never know all the truth while on this earth regardless of the path of faith or reasoning he takes.
* Even though he knows where to look for the truth he will only receive a portion or substitute of it in his life time. He must come to his Divine Master to receive his reward.
* The Temple that he is building in this life will be destroyed by death and a second Temple in his future life will be built upon its foundation.
* In our first temple of life, the truth cannot be found, so we have to be content with its substitute.

--- LESSON OF THE DEGREE ---

The primary and most apparent lesson of the Royal Master degree is patience and fortitude. However, as with most Masonic degrees there are other esoteric and or hidden or underlying meanings that are only apparent to those that investigate the degree more thoroughly.

The characters of the degree are King Solomon, his royal assistants and one the Fellowcraft Mason who are fabricating the fitting and furniture of the Temple. The articles contain within the Holy of Holies are identified and include the Ark of the Covenant. The setting is the Temple and the events occur at the time surrounding the death of Grand Master Hiram Abif. The degree begins before the Grand Master’s death and ends after his death. The degree is said to have been created by the Kings as a token of the respect and esteem for GM Hiram. The focus of the Degree is preparation for the preservation of the Word for future generations.

As the degree opens we find Grand Master Hiram at labor inspecting a completed piece of work for the Holy of Holies. At high twelve, following his usual custom, GM Hiram offered up his prayers to the Deity, as he is returning from prayers during his walk about the Temple, GM Hiram is approached by a Fellowcraft (Adoniram) with a question. The GM then imparts a lesson up on Adoniram about usefulness of life’s labors, a worthy end to life and the preservation of the Word.

It is revealed that the Three GMs had come to an agreement that all Master Masons who had proven themselves worthy, by way of their fidelity, industry and skill would receive the Word. The Word would be communicated to them only after the completion of the Temple and in the presence of all three GMs. Upon learning Adoniram posed a second question, to which GM Hiram responded, “When I die, it shall be buried there.” This would indicate that GM Hiram perceived his impending death or as we all should do, preparing for our eventual fate.

Another lesson of this degree is that useful labor on earth and a worthy end to our earthly life is an important part of each of our lives. We are all granted gifts and talents by the Creator and although those gifts are not equal we must each use them to the best of our ability. To live a productive life and die with honor and dignity should be the goal for each of us.

SELECT MASTER DEGREE

--- SYMBOLS ---

The number 27: It is 3x3x3,

The Substitute Ark and its contents:

The Masters jewels **–** The golden squares worn by our three Grand Masters and all Masters of the Craft. Arguably the most important and vital symbol of our Craft, it symbolizes an upright and regulated life, honesty, dependability and much more.

A pot of manna - In the Royal Arch Degree when the lid of the replica Ark of the Covenant was opened, Jeshua proclaimed “A Pot of Manna, the bread wherewith our fathers were fed in the wilderness.” This bread fell from the heavens and fed the Hebrews during their 40 years in the wilderness.

As Cryptic Masons the manna is a symbol of the loving kindness and generosity of our God who provides for us. It should also remind us to provide for those in need.

Aaron’s Rod - Aaron was the brother of Moses. His rod was the second item placed into the vault. According to traditions the rod blossomed and bore fruit each night. Sweet almonds on one side, and bitter almonds on the other. When the Hebrew people believed and followed God the sweet almonds would ripen and provide sustenance. When the Hebrews drifted from God path the bitter almonds would grow on the rod.

As Cryptic Masons the lesson for us is that, as long as we are heartfelt in our belief and we walk in the path of our God our lives will bear sweet almonds like Aaron’s rod. If we stray from God’s path, we too will suffer the bitterness of life.

The Book of the Law – The sacred text, God’s written word. The Hebrew word for the first five books of the Hebrew Bible is Torah which means “law.”

The Golden Triangle - The one contained within the Substitute Ark, is symbolic of God and as the key to the Word it alludes to the Word being God

--- LESSON OF THE DEGREE ---

There are a number of lessens within this degree, the primary being fervency and zeal, but it also reminds us that it is the duty of each man to do his duty even when that duty is difficult or boring. It alludes to integrity, doing what right when no one is watching, and that there are consequences when you fail to uphold your responsibility.

Its setting of the Select Master begins in the Outer Court of the Temple at the entrance to the Secret Vault and then proceeds underground into the vault of King Solomon’s Temple. The focus of the Degree is the preservation of the Ineffable Word for future generations. It is a two part degree that begins with a lesson about duty and moves into a lesson about fervency and zeal that also suggests commitment, loyalty and fidelity.

It is structured around the completion and furnishing of the Secret Vault along with the deposit of the sacred item within the secret vault. The players are King Solomon, King Hiram, Grand Master Hiram, Zabud and Ahishar. The Candidate represents Zabud, a particular friend of King Solomon. The degree opens with an intruder attempting to enter the Secret Vault. The intruder is discovered and captured. King Solomon orders the intruder put to death, but is informed the intruder is none other than his friend Zabud. The three Grand Masters confer and discuss the situation. Zabud is questioned and it is determined that he was following the Kings instructions and that he was motivated by fervency and zeal, not by curiosity. Ahishar’s dereliction of duty is discovered and for his crime Ahishar is executed. Zabud is then voted in and becomes one of the 27.

Two virtues the Degree imparts are secrecy and silence, the cardinal virtues of a Select Master and the very essence of the Masonic character. The Select Master degree complete the circle of perfection of Ancient Craft Masonry. It you have come full circle from the Entered Apprentice degree when the work on the Temple was just beginning to the point at which work on the Temple is completed.

**Point of Interest**

* The Shekinah (the divine presence of God) rested on the mercy seat the space between the cherubim on the cover of the Arc of the Covenant.
* The Shekinah took the form of a cloud and the Bath Kol (the divine voice which proclaims God's will) issued forth from the Shekinah with answers when God was consulted by the high priest.
* Ish Sodi means man of my choice or select man