

VICTORIA LODGE OF EDUCATION AND RESEARCH
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NOTES ON THE ROYAL ARK MARINER DEGREE

by

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My prime theme is modern masonry. At the outset, therefore, I shall resist the temptation to attempt to trace Royal Ark masonry back to antediluvian or even diluvian times and to enter upon a lengthy dissertation on the historical accuracy or otherwise of the biblical story of The Flood and whether or not the account of Noah and his Ark may be accepted as firm fact or fanciful fable. I say I shall resist the temptation-except to the extent of making one observation about each.

In 1923 an expedition of English and American archeologists led by Sir Leonard Woolley began a dig just south of the lower stretches of the River Euphrates. Within three years the ancient city of Ur, or Ur of the Chaldees as it is usually called and Abraham's home town, had been completely uncovered. Three years later, in 1929, Woolley was excavating another site nearby, going down and down through different levels uncovering earlier and still earlier habitations. Finally his workmen declared that they had reached the bottom or, if you like, the beginning of human habitation.

Upon a closer examination however Woolley was surprised to find that they had reached a surface of pure clay of a type laid down by water. Ten feet further down, under this clay, they found layer upon layer of Stone Age implements and artifacts. Thereupon, Woolley sent off a most extraordinary message to England and America: "We have found The Flood." Strictly speaking, the message should have read: "We have found a Flood. " It should also be noted that ten feet of clay would take a great deal longer than forty days and forty nights to accumulate. It was later established that this flood covered the whole of Mesopotamia, an area estimated to be about 4,000 square miles. So much for The Flood.

What about Noah and the Ark? The dimensions of the Ark given in Genesis represent a vessel with a displacement of about 36,000 tons. That is a pretty fair-sized vessel for pre-Q.E. 1 and Q.E. 2 days-especially to have been built by one man and his family. Not to mention the enormous task for four men and their wives to feed, water, and muck out every day as many creatures as it carried. But if indeed we must regard Noah's Ark as fable, why not? Why should not scripture, as well as masonry, present its own "peculiar system of morality, veiled in allegory"? The lessons taught and learned in the third degree of craft masonry don't depend in the slightest on whether or not the story of Hiram Abif is history or allegory. Similarly the whole point of the story of Noah's Ark is not whether there ever was or was not such a man and such a ship. The point is to present the moral teaching that the evil in men's hearts will surely lead to spiritual death and that faith in God is the only sure basis of salvation. Also the fact that the blacker the cloud the more beautiful the rainbow is to my mind an exquisite emblematic representation of our eternal hope in the promises of God.

The story of Noah and The Flood was well known to all people throughout England centuries before there were any printed bibles where they could read the

story for themselves. This familiarity derived from the Mystery Plays introduced first by the church about the 10th century. These were subsequently taken over by the trade or craft guilds by whom they were developed into a sort of music-hall of the day. These lasted into the 16th century when they were gradually replaced by Elizabethan poets and dramatists notably, of course, Shakespeare. There is no evidence that the mystery plays had any influence whatever on the content of masonic ritual. Moreover, it appears that the masonic guilds took no part in the presentation of mystery plays. However, the story of Noah was generally well-known by people of all classes and it is not surprising to find mention of Noah in masonic manuscripts.

As you are aware the earliest of these is the Regius Poem dating from about 1390 and this contains a passing reference to Noah and The Flood. Noah is mentioned in all the subsequent manuscripts and so it is quite clear that Noah figured in masonry long before Hiram Abif and was replaced by him but not until the early years of modern speculative freemasonry.

I should mention incidentally a further point about the references to Noah in the early manuscripts. In all of these, apart from the first, the references to Noah are not primarily concerned with the Ark and The Flood but to his discovery after the Flood of the two great pillars on which Enoch had inscribed the seven liberal Arts and Sciences in order to preserve man's knowledge of them in a world-wide destruction

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by flood or by conflagration. By contrast, the ritual of the Royal Ark Mariner degree is concerned only with the Flood and the Ark and does not mention this preservation of the Arts and Sciences on these two great pillars-which are not to be confused, of course, with the two great pillars at the porchway or entrance to King Solomon's Temple.

Turning now to the early years of modern speculative freemasonry we find that Noah is mentioned in Anderson's first Book of Constitutions of 1723 where we read: "Noah was commanded and directed by God to build the great Ark which, though of wood, was certainly fabricated by Geometry according to the Rules of Masonry." Further, Noah and his three sons, Japhet, Ham and Shem, all Masons true brought with them over the Flood the Traditions and Arts of the Antediluvians and amply communicated them to their growing offspring."

In Anderson's second Book of Constitutions of 1738 there is reference to Noachidae or Sons of Noah--the first name of Masons according to the old tradition." And so it would appear that masons were sons of Noah, long before they became known as "sons of the widow."

You are very familiar with the Ancient Charges as they appear in our Book of Constitutions. The first, "Concerning God and Religion", begins: "A Freemason is obliged, by his tenure, to obey the moral law". But in Anderson's Book of Constitutions that sentence reads: "A mason is obliged by his tenure to observe the moral law as a true Noachidae," or son of Noah. The Anderson version of the same Charge goes on to expand on the moral law and makes reference to "The Three Great Articles of Noah" which are generally believed to have been to abstain from idolatry, to honour God's Holy Name and to commit no murder. By contrast, Anderson makes no mention of the life-work and death of Hiram Abif.

And so it would appear that, in the early days of the first Grand Lodge, Noah was more important than Hiram. Also, that masons were "sons of Noah" long before they were "sons of the widow." But some time during the second quarter of the 18th century Hiram gained the ascendancy and Noah was relegated to a mere

passing mention along with Abel, Enoch and Jacob in the First Degree Lecture.

Where, then, did the Royal Ark Mariner degree come from? The answer, as to so many other questions in freemasonry, must simply be: "We do not know." It appears that, during the second and third quarters of the 18th century there were many keen students of freemasonry as there are now in the 20th century. But whereas we concentrate many of our studies into researching the history of freemasonry, they spent a lot of time and energy thinking up new degrees and writing new rituals to confer and expound them.

One of these degrees was that of Royal Ark Mariner. These new degrees were essentially "grassroots" developments. They were not sown, planted, tended and carefully nurtured by the official gardener--if I may so describe Grand Lodge. Indeed, Grand Lodge (to extend the analogy) treated such developments as weeds and (by inference from their official attitude towards Royal Arch and Mark masonry) sought to disown and destroy them or, at least, exclude them from the garden of "'pure Ancient masonry" which, says the solemn Act of Union of 1813, "consists of three degrees and no more."

But, as any gardener knows, weeds--or, more kindly, unofficial flowers--have a tendency to assert themselves and to grow, flourish, seed themselves and so spread. So it was with many of these unofficial degrees in 18th century masonry. Alternatively, we may presume, some withered, died and were lost. Much presumably depended on the content and symbolic teaching of the degree. But in the last analysis, the preservation of a degree depended on its recognition and acceptance by an established grand lodge--as in the case of the Royal Arch in England--or in the successful establishment of its own grand lodge--as in the case of Mark Masonry in England and both Royal Arch and Mark in Scotland.

There appears to have been more than one attempt to establish a separate and independent Grand Lodge of Royal Ark Mariners in England in both the 18th and the 19th centuries. The last of these, in 1870, under Morton Edwards as Grand Commander Noah, was not very reputable and prompted the young Mark Grand Lodge, which itself was only 15 years old, to take the Royal Ark Mariner degree under its own wing in 1871. Its authority did not become complete until thirteen years later when, in 1884, Mark Grand Lodge took the unusual and perhaps somewhat dubious step of, in effect, buying off the pretender, Edwards, for the sum of £25, his receipt for which still hangs in Mark Masons' Hall.

The history of the Royal Ark Mariner degree and of its real or spurious Grand Lodges, I am going to have to leave until a future occasion. Suffice it to say here that it is very obscure in parts, very amusing in parts and in general very chequered. Almost like an orphan, it has come under the guardianship from time to time of one masonic order or another. The earliest authentic record of the degree being conferred was in Bath in 1790 when "William Boyce took all the degrees of ye Red Cross also Royal Ark Mariner." This, strange to say was in Knight Templar Camp (as the Preceptory was then called). During the first half of the 19th century it appears to have been worked most commonly in Craft Lodges but also in Knight Templar encampments. Finally it came to rest under the control of the Grand Lodge of Mark Master Masons in England in 1871.

In Scotland, however, it comes under the authority of the Supreme Grand Chapter of Royal Arch Masons and is worked in the same lodge as the degree of Red Cross Knights. Incidentally, the Porphyry Stone is replaced by the V.S.L. Also the triangle is marked on the floor in the "time immemorial" custom by chalk or by tape (which will be of especial interest to those who have seen the presentation of the 1760 Initiation by the dramatic team of the Victoria Lodge of Education

and Research).

In Ireland, only two things seem to be certain: 1, that it was known and worked there; 2, that it no longer survives there. When, how and by whom and any other questions you care to ask must remain without any sure and unequivocal answer.

As you are well aware, in Canada the Royal Ark Mariner degree, together with the degrees of the Cryptic Rite comes under the authority and supervision of the Grand Council of Royal and Select Masters. Incidentally--and just to confuse you a little further--the Cryptic Rite in Scotland, itself comes under the authority of the Supreme Grand Royal Arch Chapter.

One final point and then I am finished for this evening. Since all attempts to institute a Grand Lodge of Royal Ark Mariners were either abortive or at best were very short-lived and because, since 1871, the Degree was taken under the wing of the Mark Grand Lodge, for a century there has been no Grand Lodge Rank in Royal Ark Masonry. As if to commemorate the centenary of its guardianship, the Mark Grand Lodge instituted in 1968 Royal Ark Mariner Grand Rank and at the same time corresponding Provincial or District Grand Rank.

Thus, after two centuries of a very chequered history, Royal Ark Masonry has finally attained a sort of quasi-Grand Lodge status. This I think you will agree is no more than it deserves in view of the extent to which it has flourished and spread in the last century. If, for example, twelve constituent Craft lodges qualify for a Grand Lodge in Prince Edward Island (or, for that matter 169, in British Columbia) then some sort of Grand Lodge status is amply merited by the Royal Ark with 473 active lodges in 1969, in England and Wales and elsewhere in the Commonwealth not to mention 77 more in Australia and 18 in India which I believe now come under their own local Mark Grand Lodges.

Principal References:

Freemasons' Guide and Compendium: Bernard S. Jones: 1956.

Royal Ark Mariner Degree, Its Origin and History: R. M. Handfield-Jones: 1969.