

The Holy Royal Ark



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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the reasons behind the fact that the Arch seems to feature so little in the Degree bearing its name – it traces the similarity of the words ‘Arche’ and ‘Arc’ in the Romantic languages – using this it traces five Alliances between God and Man and the implications of these – it draws of Gematria to underline these similarities in the Torah – there is a brief aside on Gematria and the Tarot – The book ‘Tableau Naturel’ by L.-C. de Saint-Martin is quoted as evidence of the progression of the Covenants or Alliances – finally, the Royal Arch is revealed as the ultimate synthesis of all symbolism, incorporating the Pillars of Blue Masonry, the Arch of the Most Excellent Master, the White Stone of the Mark Degree, and the Secret Name of Revelation into one composite whole which, far from missing in the Royal Arch Degree, stands as the greatest symbol in all of Masonry.

INTRODUCTION

Some of the most profound symbolism in all of Masonry, Martinism and other esoteric Orders comes from the rebuilding of the Temple at Jerusalem by Zerubbabel, as recorded in Ezra and Esdras.

The story of the captivity of the Israelites in Babylon and their eventual release is well known. The further harassment by local satraps, the election of Zerubbabel to plead their case before Cyrus, the famous debate before the king and the eventual issuing of passports and permission allowing the final rebuilding of the Temple have been the fundamental subject of some of the oldest rituals in history. Their symbolism (for example, the sword and trowel, and the bridge over the river), and their message can be found in Freemasonry alone in the rites of Memphis & Mizraim, the Scottish Rite, the Holy Royal Arch, the Royal Order of Scotland, the Scottish Rectified Rite, the Order of Knight Masons, and the Order of Elect Cohen Knight Masons of the Universe.

This message can be summarized in two key teachings: the importance of Truth, and the finding of something which was lost – within ourselves. The basic teachings are so important that they have been found in every esoteric school, and most know that the

inscription at Apollo's Oracle of Delphi, according to Plutarch, read: "Know Thyself" (Gnothi se auton). We must seek what we need within ourselves, and we must not have our eyes closed when we do so. Truth can hurt, but all Masonic teaching points towards the need of us to rebuilt and renew ourselves in order to be worthy of containing the seed of God, and the first step is for us to wake up and see ourselves for what we truly are.

One of the most important symbols in the Royal Arch is often missed by the Candidates for its mysteries! Although this might seem strange, it is not the fault of the Candidate. In the York Rite for example, common to the United States, prior to receiving the Royal Arch Degree the Candidate has passed through the Mark Degree, the Virtual Past Master and the Most Excellent Master, in which the Keystone of the Arch is set in place. Why, therefore, is there another Degree called the Holy Royal Arch, in which there is scant mention of an Arch? In the English system, the uniting of Ancients and Moderns has resulted in a Holy Royal Arch Degree which immediately follows the Degree of Master Mason. Here the blindfolded Candidate breaks through a Catenarian Arch in order to reach the Book of the Law. However, other than the property of the Catenarian Arch being that formed by a freely hanging chain, no other mention is made of this feature, and it seems to serve no further function than that of something to be broken through in order to arrive at the 'True Secret'.

Therefore men – and women – who join the Holy Royal Arch Degree on both sides of the Atlantic often wonder why there seems to be no mention of an Arch in a Degree called the 'Holy Royal Arch'. And rightly so. Why would a Degree which seems to have as its teachings the rediscovery of the furniture of the First Temple and the passage of sojourners through several veils (in the States) and being sent to clear the debris in the rubbish tips, then discovering a hidden vault have anything to do with the Arch which was completed in the Most Excellent Master Degree, and which was not mentioned at all prior to the Degree in England?

Strangely enough, the answer has everything to do with translation!

THE REAL MEANING OF ‘ARCH’

It is always nice to save the point till the end of the paper. Unfortunately I have to *begin* with the point. Once the listener understands the point, I could simply sit down and allow the audience to work the rest out for themselves. However, part of the pleasure of delivering a paper is the fact that, even if you think you know what I am going to say, you cannot be certain, so you may as well listen! I can even assure you that, since the book from which I have taken many of these ideas – *Le Tableau Naturel* by Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin, an French eighteenth century philosopher and mystic – has never previously been translated into English, I can assure you that I am going to say things you have never heard explicitly stated before. I hope this will be enough to hold your attention!

Now for the punch line. In French, the word ‘arc’ and ‘arche’ are interchangeable.

Why is this significant?

Well, let us consider the translations of the following words: Ark of Noah – *Arche de Noé*; Rainbow – *Arc-en-ciel*; Ark of Moses in the bulrushes – *Arche de Moïse*; Ark of the Covenant – *Arche d’Alliance*; Arch uniting two pillars – *Arche*. This similarity is observed in all Romantic languages.

Now, this might not seem particularly significant at first, but take a moment to think of the significance of the fact that there is a link between the Rainbow (the Ark-in-the-Sky), Noah’s Ark, the Ark of Moses in the bulrushes, the Ark of the Covenant, and the Ark upon the Pillars. As an example of the latter, the Summons of one of the oldest Chapter in New York State bears an intriguing engraving of two pillars with an arch, each pillar bearing a cherub whose wings extend over the arch.

The Hebrews employ a system called ‘Gematria’ in which each letter of the alphabet bears a numeric value, and in consequence different words will carry the same

total numerical value. The Hebrew Kabbalists believed that this suggested a metaphysical link between such words. For example, the words Menorah (**hrnm**) and Noon (**rhx**) have the same numerical value (295). This would demonstrate a link between the Holy Light of the Temple and the noonday sun, which stood still for Joshua to accomplish his total defeat of the enemies of Israel. Now, one Gematric value worth keeping in mind is the letter Mem (**m**). This is the second great Mother Letter and represents water, which itself can represent something which needs to be crossed. It has a value of forty. Incidentally, for those who like subjects for meditation, the numbers 4, 40 and 400 are of course linked. In Hebrew – which counts using letters (there is no ‘0’) – they are the letters Daleth (**d**), Mem (**m**) and Tau (**t**), symbolizing ‘Door’ (or threshold), ‘Water’ (or passage) and ‘Cross’ respectively. Threshold; Passage; Cross.

Lest we think that Gematria is little more than playing with numbers and letter, let us recall (as popularized in the recent novel “The DaVinci Code”, that it was the Gematric ‘Atbash Code’ which enabled experts to decipher the name ‘Sheshath’ in the Book of Jeremiah as referring to ‘Babylon’, using a simple transposition code of which Big Chief I-Spy would have been proud!

As a brief aside, if we look at the corresponding cards in the Book of Thoth, we find the ‘Empress’ (Daleth), the ‘Hanged Man’ (Mem) and ‘The Universe’ (Tau). In *The Tarot of the Bohemians*, Papus actually placed the ‘Fool’ between ‘Judgment’ and the ‘World’, so our numbers in his system would read: ‘Emperor’, ‘Death’, ‘World’. However, to focus on the usual system, A. E. Waite, in *The Pictorial Key to the Tarot* states that the ‘Empress’ is the *Mother*, and the *Gateway*. We also find a curious change in the image on this card over time. Early cards of the Empress have her bearing a shield, upon which is an Eagle. By the time of the Rider-Waite pack, the bird has disappeared, only to be resurrected in more recent decks, for example, that of Paul Forster Case and Tabitha Cicero – with Golden Dawn influence – as a dove, which in the latter deck is depicted head down and wings spread, as in so many Renaissance images, thus forming the letter ‘Shin’ (**W**).

Now, earth is often symbolized by the four elements: Earth, Air, Water and Fire, which have their counterpart in the four letters of the Tetragrammaton. Just as Shin (**W**), the fifth letter, impregnates the Holy Name of God – broken in two in certain esoteric doctrines by the prevarication of man to form two binaries, Yod-Heh (**hy**) and Vav-Heh (**hv**) – to form Yeheshuah, so matter becomes impregnated with Fire from Heaven, the Breath of God, or Spirit, and the four elements and commingled with a fifth element – Spirit. Let us remember, however, that 5 is a number of evil omen to Martinists, representing prevaricating Man, which is later transformed into hope by the three flames of Shin as representing the Supernal Triad which impregnates matter (4) and transforms it into perfection (7), contained within the word of five letters represented by Yeheshuah (**hvwhy**). Thus the Empress, or symbol of earth and womb, is about to be impregnated by spirit, or the dove, to form Perfect Man. Once again the Spirit of God moves upon the waters...

This particular journey is not a subject of this paper, but I mention it in passing.

*Revenons à nos moutons*¹, as the French say, and determine the link between these key articles – and events – in Hebraic history. From among a sinning world, Noah rescued the posterity of man and floated, at the whim of God's will, upon the waters, for forty days. A dove was sent to search for land. Did the dove come from Noah or from God? The story tells us it was Noah who sent the dove, but I sometimes wonder... When the Ark landed on Mount Ararat God demonstrated his promise to man that he would never again use *water* as a means to destroy mankind by placing an Ark in the sky – as it were, a mirror of the Ark on the land, an Ark of seven bands or lights, a celestial Menorah. This was the First Covenant. The French word for Covenant is also most interesting. It is 'alliance'. Given the fact that the French language has for centuries been the language of diplomacy, it is curious to note that their word for this event

¹ Let us return to the subject (lit. 'Let us return to our sheep').

suggests a *political* coming together between man and his God, and act which implies a joining to mutual benefit.

I will gloss over what is considered the Second Covenant, that of God and Abraham. Here the relationship between God and Man was slightly narrowed from the whole of Mankind to a smaller group, but still significantly larger than the Chosen People with whom He was later to deal. Note the usual elements in the story: God gives Abram many lands – “unto thy seed have I given this land, from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the river Euphrates” (Gen 15:18), which is far greater than the Promised Land in size, but that “they shall afflict them four hundred years” (Gen 15:13). We have the two pillars or contending forces, Ishmael and Isaac, and the Alliance which this time is more under man’s control – the circumcision, which forms a circle, and the response from God was in this case a little more obtuse: He sent three angels. I cannot in all honesty come up with a good reason why these three angels represent an Ark or Arch, though the third letter of the Hebrew alphabet, Gimel (ג), represents a camel, the ship (or ark) of the desert?

Later in the biblical story, we learn of one who was set adrift upon the waters of the Nile in an Ark – Moses, who was discovered by the daughter of the Pharaoh and raised in the Royal Household. In young manhood he kills an Egyptian guard and flees into the desert, where according to Martinez de Pasqually in his book *Treatise on the Reintegration of Beings*, he remains for forty years. Then he encounters the burning bush, where God gives him His True Name. Through Moses He liberates chosen man from his captivity – this time a physical captivity, rather than a symbolical captivity of sin. They escape and spend forty years in the desert, floating hither and thither at random on this sea of sand. Now God demonstrates a *Third Covenant* by giving Moses the Commandments and His Seal², written on stone. Now Moses commands Aholiab to create a portable Tabernacle to contain the Ark of the Covenant – or the Arch of Alliance

² See R. Ambelain’s article on the Ark of the Covenant, an Appendix in his book *Le Martinisme*, which can be read in the translations section at www.mouup.org, or on the Thomas Smith Webb Chapter of Research website at www.thomaswebb.org/transactions.htm.

as the French describe it – made by Bezaleel, which will contain the new Contract between God and his Elect.

SIGNIFICANCE

What does this all mean?

Saint-Martin drew a very significant point to the attention of his readers in his *Tableau Naturel*: the Ark of Noah was free and completely at the whim of the elements under God's control. The Tabernacle was semi-fixed and spent time both in motion at God's whim, and also stable upon the earth under man's control. Interestingly, while fixed it tended not to kill people, which could not be said for its time in motion, when it had a reputation for killing those to touched it, this Ark adrift in the desert. Finally, under Solomon, it was firmly and, they thought at the time, permanently fixed to Aretz, or earth. Tradition tells us that the place they chose was the very place where Adam, original man, was buried, and also the very place where later Yeheshuah, the Christ, shed his blood and became the perfect sacrifice. While this is only an amalgam of traditions or myths (and let us remember also that this was the spot where Mohammed's horse struck the ground with his hoof on the prophet's journey to Heaven), it is significant that such a powerful aggregation of mythologies attach to this single place. Let us not forget in passing that the dove not only led Noah to dry land, but that the dove led the Christ to his mission as a great prophet who was, in the eyes of many believers, the Prophet.

We now have three Alliances formed through the symbol of the Ark or Arch. We have an interminable tension between fire and water as well. Earth was formed out of the waters, and it will end in fire. For Noah, the world was drowned, and God signed His first covenant with fire *in* heaven (the rainbow). Abraham had his contending forces in Ishmael and Isaac. Moses was surrounded by pillars of fire and water: indeed, once again we have a microcosm of Noah's flood, as the Egyptians are inundated and killed by water, and God sets a pillar of light before the fleeing Israelites as his promise of salvation. Solomon caused a laver of water to stand beside the altar of holocausts, and

erected Boaz and Jachin: this time the Shekinah is Divine approbation as signified by fire *from* heaven. The Ark as a symbol also becomes more focused in each story, from a container of the universe in the Flood, to a container of God's Elect in the bulrushes, to a container of God's Presence in the Ark of the Covenant. Again, as we alluded to earlier, the aimless floating on the waters by Noah's ark is reflected in the desert wanderings, as the children of Israel, descendants of Abraham spend forty years (remember: 40 is the number of Mem - מ, or Water), as they are aimlessly tossed from the shore of Egypt, a corrupt land, to the shore of a land flowing with milk and honey (the Promised Land): Chalav (בֵּלֶעֶב) means Milk and also has a value of 40. However, as the respective power of the two parties to the Alliance changes over time, we now see man carrying the Ark rather than the Ark carrying man...

The wealth of symbolism in these three passages is almost overwhelming. To some extent all we have considered sets the scene for the rebuilding of the Temple and the scenario of the Holy Royal Arch Degree. Now we come to the fourth alliance with God.

THE HOLY ROYAL ARCH

Following the prevarication of the Hebrews, they are led into captivity and their city and temple are utterly destroyed. Out of this despair comes that small still voice of Truth. The personification – or archetype – of this virtue is Zerubbabel. Indeed, a significant moment in the Webb ritual is the presentation of his ring (the '*ring of truth*'?)

Both Zerubbabel's journey with the remnant of Israel and the journey of the three sojourners seeking work on the rebuilding project mimic the original Exodus. A group of chosen people move over water (the River Jordan or a body of water mystically referred to as *Starbuznai* in some Orders, which is also given as the name of one of the local satraps in the Bible). Incidentally they cross a bridge which is usually depicted as an Arch or ark, and covered with emblems of mortality (skulls, bones, etc). Two realms, two countries, two worlds. They are fleeing from a sinful place, Babylon, to reach a new land of promise. They carry the remnants of the Temple treasures, and once among the

ruins of Jerusalem, erect a tabernacle of 4 veils (4 x 10 = 40). The replica Ark is rediscovered for the replica Temple, within an Arch or Ark (reminiscent of the Rainbow in shape over the 'Ark'), containing the Book of the Law (Scribe), Aaron's Rod (Priest), and Manna (King – he who leads his flock and feeds it). Again, three Sojourners, three rulers, three objects contained in the Ark (just as there were three tribes issuing forth from Noah – Ham, Seth and Japheth). So here we finally see the repeated pattern of Three Alliances between Man and God, each in a way lesser than the previous one.

Firstly we had God's Alliance with the whole population of earth, with man inside an Ark which represented the Universe, steered by God, and mirrored by a celestial Ark of seven colors. This was the 'Blue' period, where the waters were represented by the color blue.

Next we see the Alliance between Abraham and God, as represented by the color Purple: for "the Lord had said unto Abram... I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee and make thy name great" (Gen. 12: 1-2). And Melchizedek, king of Salem brought forth bread and wine: and he was the priest of the most high God. And he blessed him, and he said, Blessed by Abram of the most high God, possessor of heaven and earth" (Gen. 14: 18-19).

Thirdly, we see an Alliance with a Chosen People, or subset of mankind, marked by the Red of the blood which they smeared on the lintels of their houses before the Exodus. The harbinger of this Alliance was one man inside an Ark which represents a Chosen One, and mirrored by a glittering Ark which was partly mobile and partly stationary. Later we see this same Ark permanently seated at one of the world's great *Omphali*, or Navels, where the terrestrial and Celestial worlds come close together.

Finally, we see a fourth Alliance between God and a subsection of the Chosen People, in which a replica Ark is discovered under the ground, beneath an Ark of stone. For those of you familiar with the colors of the veils in this variation of the Holy Royal Arch Degree, I will offer this possibility for its color being white in a quotation from the

Mark Master Degree: “I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it” (Rev. 2:17). Again, to explain this to those familiar with the Webb ritual, in the English ritual the broaching of the Catenarian arch reveals a double cubical white altar, upon which is a golden plate containing the letters of the name of Deity. The stone is discovered, and the true name of God and the true Word of Master Mason is revealed. Here indeed is the ‘New Name’ known only to those who receive it! Another important point for meditation.

However, in all this we detect a theme of diminishment. We have gone from floods through desert to crossing streams. God’s interventions as a true *Deus ex Machina* have gone from global, to exercised upon a Chosen People, then to a subset even of that group. The celestial Ark became a man-made one and finally a poor imitation.

If all this talk of dwindling symbolism is depressing, let us remember that diminishing need for unequal Alliances or Covenants and shows of authority or power from God, is due to Man becoming a greater partner in the agreement. In successive Alliances man is developing as a spiritual being, and the symbol of the Holy Royal Arch is perhaps one of the most profound of all: we finally see the Alliance symbolized in the most perfect way imaginable. Man at last recognizes, like Zerubbabel his archetype, that Truth lies within. When one realizes this important fact, one can start to clear away the rubbish and dross of one’s inner being, in order to prepare a sure foundation on which to build the Spiritual Temple, that House not made with Hands. And yet we are not really building it, for once the dross and rubbish are cleared away we make an important discovery: *it was there all the time*. The spiritual temple still needs to be built. But it is only to house what is already within us. And with this happy discovery we build with joy and rejoicing!

And armed with this knowledge we can now finally comprehend the wonderful symbolism of the two pillars surmounted by the arch: whose harbingers have been the Ark of Noah, the Rainbow, the Circumcision, the Barque of Moses, the Ark of the Covenant and the Catenarian Arch.

Duality is eternally united by a third force. In the story of finding the Ark beneath an Arch, our minds are drawn for a final time to contemplate the two great contending forces of Day and Night, Man and Woman, War and Peace, Good and Evil, Strength and Mercy, Heaven and Earth, Jachin and Boaz, joined together by a Uniting Power: the Ultimate Arch or Ark of Alliance between God and Man. Holding the whole edifice of Earth and Heaven together is the Keystone. For Earth is represented by Boaz. Heaven is represented by Jachin. The Alliance is represented by an Arch (or Ark, or Arc) which links both inseparably together. Earth and Heaven, Man and God linked by the symbol of unity. And the Keystone which keeps the bond between Heaven and Earth conjoined and co-dependent for all eternity is none other than the Stone Which the Builders Rejected. The Fifth and Final Alliance will endure for all eternity. In it Man has regained his place of prominence in the order of things, and can use the Keystone to bridge the gulf between the two pillars, a keystone which finally gives him the power to recognize his own divinity, and his ability to commune directly with God. To give a Christian interpretation of this symbol, this Keystone represents the Logos, the Word or Breath of God. Upon this White stone is another secret name, this time of eight letters (the Mark Master Masons know it well). Let me add that in most schools of esoteric thought the number 8 represents perfection. In Martinism, for example, quoting from a Lecture, “ The Number EIGHT is called the OGDOD and stands for Equilibrium. In Nicomachus’ Arithmetic it is universal harmony. In Martinism, 8 implies the Cosmic Christ. Seen from above, to use a metaphor, 8 is the third number down from the apex or 10 and is therefore the Divine Sonship”. Now we can finally see that the symbol of the Holy Royal Arch is so much more than rediscovering the Lost Word: for the Lost Word which we seek is not a mere pronouncement, but the Word which created the Universe and which binds Heaven and earth together for eternity.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, then, we have been on a long journey through the early days of Man’s relationship with God. As a version of the Degree tells us: ‘we have been brought by ways we know not; we have been led in places that we have not known; we have had darkness made light before us and crooked things straight’. We have seen that in all, God

formed five Alliances with man, and that in each , the relationship became more equal, and man played an increasingly active role.

We saw that by understanding the wider interpretation of the word “Arch” to include “Ark” or “Arc”, an impressive number of parallels and symbols opened up to our eyes, better enabling us to understand not only the meaning of the symbols but also the flow of time between these events. We saw how each Alliance or Covenant between God and Man was symbolized by an Ark or Arch both on earth and in Heaven. In the first these two Arks were physically separate. By the fifth they were joined, forming a Jacob’s ladder between the earthly and heavenly realms, and the True Master’s Word is revealed to us in the allegory of the rediscovered Master’s Word.

Finally, I hope we have come to appreciate the importance of the “Ark” or “Arch” in the Holy Royal Arch Degree, which has helped us and furthered our appreciation of this profound degree.