

The Solomonic Degrees of the York Rite

Very early in our Masonic experiences we were charged to consider ourselves called on to make a daily advancement in Masonic knowledge. Many do take this injunction seriously. They advance their Masonic knowledge by regular attendance of their own Lodge or other Lodges, by learning the rituals of the degrees, by reading literature on Masonic history and practices and by talking with other Masons.

Since 1717 and the organization of Masonic governance as we understand it, a wide variety of degrees have been developed and worked, many remain with us and some have fallen into misuse. The fabric of Freemasonry as we know it today, in the twenty-first century, is richer as a result of the variety and variations of ritual worked by our early Brethren. Since the middle of the eighteenth century, various efforts have been made to group degrees together and, since the mid nineteenth century, to administer these in various Orders or Masonic bodies (sometimes referred to as concordant or appendant bodies although these terms now are seldom used). In turn the majority of these have been grouped into the Scottish and York Rites and the Shrine as practiced in Ontario and across Canada and North America (although the expression York Rite is merely a shorthand notation as it is not equivalent to the Scottish Rite with its administrative apparatus).

A number of the degrees of the York Rite are referred as Solomonic or Hiramite and are focused on the Temples at Jerusalem, of which there were two. The first and best known was built by Solomon, King of Israel and assisted by Hiram, King of Tyre and Hiram Abiff (to a plan of King David) and was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. when the Israelites were carried off into captivity. The second Temple was rebuilt on the foundation of the first, under the direction of Zerubbabel, Prince of Israel after the captivity and existed until 70 A.D. when it was destroyed by the Romans. A good illustrated Dictionary and Concordance of the Bible will provide many details about the two temples.

MASONIC LODGE

In the Lodge, which is the entry point for all Masonic endeavors, you laboured as an **Entered Apprentice**, carrying materials for the building of all parts of Solomon's Temple, you were able to observe its beautiful proportions, its massive Pillars, its Mosaic Pavement, its Lights, Ornaments and Jewels. As a **Fellowcraft** you have added knowledge of the engineering perfection of the minutest joint and section as you worked Rough Ashlars into Perfect Ashlars, fitted to adorn and beautify that magnificent building. As a **Master Mason** you have seen the wondrous beauty of the building unfold as the God-given plans were carried out to completion.

ROYAL ARCH

Around the world, entry into a Chapter of Royal Arch Masons is restricted to Master Masons. In Ontario the Holy Royal Arch consists of three degrees while in other jurisdictions it consists of one degree (UK, for example, which works only the Royal Arch degree. The Mark Master degree is placed elsewhere in their system) or four degrees (Nova Scotia as well as many US jurisdictions include a Virtual Past Master degree). In Ireland the one degree Royal Arch focuses on King Josiah and repairs to the existing (first) Temple.

As a **Mark Master Mason** you will see the Keystone prepared by the Master Builder rejected by the Overseers. But as a **Most Excellent Master** you will see that same stone recovered and set in its proper place in the principal arch, the finishing touch of a superb edifice which became the wonder of the world.

As a **Royal Arch Mason** you have found that superb edifice in ruins and plans are underway for its rebuilding. While you prepare the ground for the new foundations you discover a long lost secret.

ROYAL AND SELECT MASTERS (The Cryptic Rite)

The **Royal Master Degree** completes and illustrates the story of how the Secret was lost, and leads us to reflect further on the principal object of the Third Degree. For those who are Royal Arch Masons and wonder at the location of the lost secret, the **Select Master Degree** completes the story by telling us how, where and by whom, the great Secret was hidden. The **Super Excellent Master Degree** shows how the infidelity of Zedekiah brings down on his head the wrath of Nebuchadnezzar, who orders his Captain of the Guard (army general) to attack and sack Jerusalem. He seizes the sacred vessels, razes the Temple, and carries the Jewish people into captivity in Babylon. The perils of infidelity to our trust, the blessings of faith in the true God, and the joys of friendships formed in masonry are emphasized in this Degree. There are some administrative variations across Canada with an Eastern Jurisdiction (the Maritimes), a Western Jurisdiction (Manitoba to BC inclusive) and Ontario.

KNIGHTS TEMPLAR

Entrance to a Preceptory of Knights Templar is restricted to Royal Arch Masons who are also Trinitarian Christians. The first degree in a Preceptory, the **Illustrious Order of the Red Cross**, is however, Solomonic (not Christian), and relates to Zerubbabel's search for admission to the court of the new Persian King, Darius, and his discussions with the King regarding the overwhelming importance of Truth in life and action. As a result of these discussions, Darius permits Zerubbabel to return to Jerusalem with his people, to rebuild the Temple. The two remaining Orders of a Preceptory are not mentioned simply because they are connected with the history of the Crusades, over a millennia later in time.

The disadvantage of the grouping of degrees mentioned above is that the logic of the evolution of the story of the building of the first Temple, its destruction and its rebuilding, does not relate to the various Masonic bodies which administer these degrees. In addition, there are a range of other old degrees which are "housed" with other bodies such as the **Allied Masonic Degrees** of Canada (open to Royal Arch Masons) or the **Order of the Secret Monitor** of Canada (open to Master Masons).

The following ordering of the degrees shows the logical sequence of the story of the Temple.

Degree	Location	Pre-requisite for Entry
Entered Apprentice	Craft Lodge	as per Constitution
Fellow Craft	Craft Lodge	Entered Apprentice
Master Mason	Craft Lodge	Fellow Craft
Mark Master Mason	MMM Lodge	Master Mason
Select Master	RM Council	Royal Master
Most Excellent Master	MEM Lodge	Mark Master Mason
Royal Master	SM Council	Royal Arch Mason

Super Excellent Master	RSM Council	Select Master
Order of the Red Cross	Preceptory	Royal Arch Maason
Royal Arch Mason	HRA Chapter	Most Excellent Mason

This brief explanation relates to how the major York Rite bodies are practiced in Ontario.

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