

The Royal Arch Banners

In the past Chapters have often opened with a minimum of regalia and paraphernalia in evidence. Key items such as Pedestal, gold plate and Tetragrammaton, the small altar, VOSL and triangle MUST be used.

Often it is just too much trouble to lift out the banners and hang them in the Chapter room. But the banners (and ensigns) are important for the Royal Arch: and please note I am using two words while the ritual uses only the word "banners." An "Ensign" is the usual expression to denote a flag used by the military and was also the lowest commissioned rank in the infantry, so I feel we can refer to the four banners in the east as "ensigns".

I would also ask you to bear two important items in mind. First, like so much of Freemasonry, the origins of many degrees, including the Royal Arch, are lost in time but appear to have originated, generally speaking, with men who were members of the Church of England. This is not a debate about what protestant religion they belonged to or a debate on whether it was a Geneva Bible, a "breeches" bible, King James version, or whatever although I have use the King James version when I checked to see what the designs meant.

My own research indicates to me that the earliest known written reference to the "Royal Arch" occurred in 1743 in a Dublin newspaper which reported on a Procession of Masons in Youghal, County Cork (on the south coast of Ireland) which included two "Excellent Masons" who carried "The Royal Arch". But we don't know what this really was, and it could have been a Tracing Board. An Irish author, Fifield Dassigny, in his 1744 *"Serious and Impartial Enquiry"* into Freemasonry in Ireland, described the Royal Arch as "a body of men who have passed the chair." I have not seen Dassigny's work, but have verified this with contacts in the Grand Lodge of Ireland.

The Evolution of the Banners

It appears that the Banners and the four Veils as we know them were originally integrated together. It is a shame that the earliest rituals were never written down and were passed on orally and have been lost. One of the oldest collections of ritual is "Duncan's Masonic Ritual and Monitor" which has this to say in the catechism of the candidate in response to the question "To whom do the four veils allude?", replies, "To the four tribes of the children of Israel, who bore the banners through the wilderness, Viz: Judah, Reuben, Ephriam and Dan, emblematically represented by the strength of the Lion, the intelligence of Man, the patience of an Ox and the swiftness of an Eagle" [p. 255].

The Twelve Tribes of Israel

Judah, Naphtali, Asher, Dan, Benjamin, Manasseh, Issachar, Zebulun, Reuben, Simeon, Gad and Ephraim are the names of the twelve tribes according to our Royal Arch Ritual. The Bible says the twelve Tribes were named after ten of the Patriarch Joseph's sons and two of his grandsons.

The Levites, the descendants of Israel's son, Levi, were a "tribe" of priests and not counted in the twelve tribes. The descendants of Israel's son Joseph (the youngest and most favored, who had a coat of many colours) were counted as two tribes depending on whether they were descended from Joseph's son Ephraim or Manasseh.

We must also be careful because the Bible (that is, the King James Version) differs in its accounts from Jewish tradition - and, of course, the various editions have their own "adjustments" of spelling and meaning.

Depicting the Twelve Tribes on the Banners

So, how did the particular designs of the Banners originate? Bear with me while I state the definition of the Banners as listed in the Ritual of the Grand Chapter of Royal Arch Masons of Canada in the Province of Ontario. In most cases Genesis, as written in my (1953) King James Version of the Bible, depicts a reference to the particular tribe, but not always, and there are other places where we must search to find out the reason for the design adopted. Where a variance with Jewish tradition is known, I have included it to indicate this variation.

I really can't say where the background colours originated as there is great variety depending, not unnaturally, on the availability of colour pigments.

Judah - [Ritual] Crimson colour with a Lion. Genesis Ch 49 v 9 "Judah is a lion's whelp." (Banner 1) {The Jewish people are descended from Judah.}

Naphtali - [Ritual] Blue colour with "a hind let loose". Genesis Ch 49 v 21 "Naphtali is a hind let loose that bears comely fawns." (Banner 2)

Asher - [Ritual] Purple and an overflowing cup. Genesis Ch 49 v 21 "Asher's food shall be rich and he shall yield royal dainties." Jewish tradition holds that Asher's banner depicted an olive tree. Both can be considered as depicting "gastronomic richness". (Banner 3)

Dan - [Ritual] Green with a serpent biting a horse's heel. Genesis Ch 49 v 17 "Dan shall be a serpent in the roadway. . . that bites the horses heels so that its rider falls backward." There is no Jewish tradition linking the symbol of the Eagle with Dan - the symbol was always a serpent. (Banner 4)

Benjamin - [Ritual] Green with a wolf. Genesis Ch 49 v 27 "Benjamin is a ravenous wolf . . . devouring the prey." (Banner 5)

Manasseh - [Ritual] Pale Pink with a vine beside a wall. In Genesis Ch 41:51, "Joseph called the name of the first-born Manasseh for he said God has made me forget all my hardship. In Deuteronomy, Manasseh played a significant role in the history of Israel. The Christian description of a "fruitful vine near a spring whose branches climb over a wall" was appropriated for Manasseh. Jewish tradition holds that Manasseh's banner displayed a unicorn. (Banner 6)

Issachar - [Ritual] Sky Blue with an ass crouching between two burdens. Genesis Ch 49 v 14 "Issachar is a strong ass crouching between the sheepfolds" although two saddlebags or burdens are substituted as being more meaningful. (Banner 7) *Zebulun* - [Ritual] Purple with a ship. Genesis Ch 49 c 13 "Zebulun will dwell at the shore of the sea; he should become a haven for ships." (Banner 8)

Reuben - [Ritual] Scarlet with wavy lines. Genesis 49 v 3-4 "Reuben, you are my first born . . . unstable (i.e. turbulent) as the waters". The waters are depicted by wavy lines. Jewish tradition lists Reuben's banner as either mandrakes or the figure of a man - not surprising since the root of this highly poisonous plant was thought to resemble human form. This indicates a variation in emphasis but a consistency with Genesis. (Banner 9)

Simeon - [Ritual] Yellow with a sword and dagger crossed. Genesis Ch 49 v 5 "Simeon and Levi are brothers; weapons of violence are their swords." (Banner 10) Jewish tradition holds that Simeon's banner showed a city.

Gad - [Ritual] White and a troop of horsemen. Genesis Ch 49 v 19 "Raiders shall raid Gad but he shall raid at their heels." Jewish tradition holds that Gad's banner showed a camp. (Banner 11)

Ephraim - [Ritual] Green with an Ox. To find a biblical reference for this symbolism we have to turn to Deuteronomy Ch 33 v 17 and the blessing given by Moses to the Israelites. When Moses mentions Joseph he says "In majesty he is like a firstborn bull; his horns are like the horns of a wild ox. With them he will gore the nations, even those at the ends of the earth. Such are the ten thousands of Ephraim; such are the thousands of Manasseh." Although there are references to both Ephraim and Manasseh, the vine having already been used, the Ox was adopted. (Banner 12)

The Order of the Banners and Ensigns

The reason for the order of the Banners and Ensigns corresponds to the listing in the second chapter of the Book of Numbers. The tribes were listed in a particular order in which they were to march when fleeing out of Egypt and then into camp. When the tribes were encamped the Levites were in the centre with the Tabernacle and the twelve tribes were arranged in four divisions of three tribes each at the cardinal points of the compass. From this we can arrive at the four divisions of the Army of Israel:

Judah (1) with *Issachar* (7) and *Zebulun* (8) to the East
Reuben (9) with *Simeon* (10) and *Gad* (11) to the South
Ephraim (12) with *Manasseh* (6) and *Benjamin* (5) to the West
Dan (4) with *Asher* (3) and *Naphtali* (2) in the North

Placing the Banners in the Chapter room

We can see the logical placement of the Banners [Ensigns] in the Chapter room correspond to the placement of the tribes on the march and in camp:

EAST DIVISION - SCARLET; MAN

Judah (1st on North side, in the East #1), *Issachar* (1st on the South side, in the East #7),
Zebulun (2nd on the South side, in East #8)

SOUTH DIVISION - CRIMSON; LION

Reuben (3rd on South side #9), *Simeon* (4th on South side #10) *Gad* (5th on South side #11)

Levites and the apparatus of the Tabernacle (as represented by the Pedestal, plate and Tetragrammaton and candles - better placement would see this in the centre)

WEST DIVISION - GREEN; OX

Ephraim (6th on South side #12), *Manasseh* (6th on North side in West #6), *Benjamin* (5th on North side in West #5)

NORTH DIVISION - GREEN; EAGLE

Dan (4th on North side #4), Asher (3rd on North side #3), Naphtali (2nd on North side #2)

I want to comment on the Ensigns of the four Divisions of the Army of Israel as the composition of the Divisions had been based on the groupings of the tribes. Perhaps for political correctness, even in those far off days of the development of Royal Arch ritual in the early to mid 18th century, the Ensigns allocated to the four Divisions of the Army did not take the symbols from the Banners of the senior Tribe of the Division in three of four cases. Instead, there was a deliberate creation of separate symbols - but, again, corresponding to Biblical accounts. [The exception to the rule is that the West Division is depicted by an Ox, which is also used for the Tribe of Ephraim.]

Ezekiel Ch 1 v 10 describes four beings each with four faces corresponding to four living beings as "each had the face of a man, and on the right side each had the face of a lion, and on the left the face of an ox; each also had the face of an eagle." Revelation Ch 4 v 7 describes four separate living creatures "the first living creature was like a lion, the second was like an ox, the third had a face like a man, the fourth was like a flying eagle." In early Christianity the four symbols were associated with the four Gospels and their authors - St. Matthew (the man), St. Mark (the lion), St. Luke (the ox) and St. John (the eagle). Although various later authors changed the symbols around at different times they did agree that each face or figure represented an aspect of Jesus's work as well as a particular gospel. It is this important aspect of the description of the four Ensigns that is carried on in our Ritual today - we do not treat them as individual Ensigns, but as a single entity "The four large banners represent the standards of the four divisions of the army of Israel, *and unitedly bear a device* of an angelic nature, under the *combined figures* of a man, a lion, an ox and an eagle".

It is not hard to imagine the adoption of these four symbols for depicting the Ensigns of the four Divisions of the Army of Israel.

En passant: More modern research indicates that between the 1740's and 1864 there were two versions of the Royal Arch degree worked in Ireland. One, which forms the basis of the current Irish Royal Arch, is the repair of the Temple under King Josiah and the second, the more usual one for us, being the rebuilding of the Temple under the direction and leadership of Zerubbabel. By the way, the account of the repairs under King Josiah (King of Judah 639-609 BC) appears to conform more closely with Biblical accounts in II Kings 22:1). The Irish Grand Chapter had adopted the Josiah version by the 1860's and I am not sure how closely it relates to our ritual. I hope to obtain a copy of the Irish RA ritual and to review its contents at a later date. So, if you are travelling, try and carry a letter of introduction from the Scribe E., your dues card and a copy of our ritual. If you are examined, it is acceptable to ask the examiners to test you on our ritual - not theirs.

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Reference

Serious and Impartial Enquiry, Fifield Dassigny 1744

Duncan's Masonic Ritual and Monitor, Malcolm C. Duncan

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