

## The Royal Arch Tracing Board

Companions,

As Masonry moved from the operative to the speculative we find that it adopted the workings of the operative stonemasons but also gave speculative meanings to their artifices and practices. As we all know, the architect of the Cathedral, the Castle, the Great house, would first lay out the design of each part on a tracing or draughting board for the masons to follow. These, subsequently, were redrawn full size – probably in sand – for the workmen to produce the stonework prior to be fitted into place on the actual construction. This draughting or tracing board was adopted and absorbed into the ritual working of the speculative masons and indeed, became part of our Lodge furniture.

We are told within our ritual working that the tracing board is for the Master to lay lines and draw designs on. I believe that whilst we are told in Craft masonry that it is the Master of the Lodge who, more perhaps in days gone by, used the boards to explain our symbols to the candidate, in speculative terms we are really looking at the tracing boards of the Great Architect, the Grand Geometrician and the Most High.

There is a wealth of symbolism on these boards which I want quickly to acknowledge, but which, because of time constraint, I must leave and pass on only to that which I believe to be central to this address.

The first tracing board shows Jacobs ladder as the path leading from earth to Heaven, and on it as symbols or Angels it has the three spiritual virtues of Faith, Hope and Charity – or love - as the means to climb that ladder from earth to Heaven.

On the second tracing board we see a Temple with a winding staircase leading to an upper chamber where, after many challenges, the speculative mason goes to receive his reward. Well, companions, we are instructed to raise a superstructure perfect in its parts and honorable to the builder, and I wonder whether the Temple picture is indeed symbolical of the mason himself. The reward is given after the many trials of life referred to analogously in the second tracing board lecture which when viewed in this way seems to make more sense. The reward is, of course, to the Mason's upper chamber, or mind – the reward of knowledge or perhaps wisdom.

On the third tracing board we are reminded by the emblems of mortality to complete our allotted task whilst it is yet day and to remember that we have a built-in knowledge that there is something beyond darkness visible if we attend to the knowledge of the 'Self'. Mankind instinctively feels within himself that it does not all finish with mortal death and we are instructed to look within ourselves to unravel that instinct.

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So here we have the three tracing boards of the teaching of the Great Architect's message to mankind very briefly and inadequately explained, but it leads on to my point. Companions. As the Royal Arch is the continuation of the mason's progress toward the 'Word', towards the light, toward a knowledge of the Most High, so I would suggest that in the middle of every Chapter we lay out the next step. We find the Royal Arch interpretation of the tracing board of TTALGMH in a three dimensional, as opposed to a pictorial form, laid out on the carpet. The Craft with its multiple degrees and symbolism requires the convenience of easy transition from one degree to another, hence the three pictorial tracing boards. However, once the convocation is open, the removal of the veil completes the Royal Arch tracing board.

My chosen task today is to offer a few personal – and I emphasize the personal – thoughts on some aspects of our tracing board to take us beyond the explanations offered in the traditional, as opposed to the recently revised, Royal Arch lectures.\*

Let us examine the centerpiece on the floor.

**These days we have the five platonic bodies. We list them. We describe them. But why are they there?**

**Do the seven sets of exquisite columns mean anything?**

**If the central feature is the pedestal, why is it not in the centre?**

**.We have the three major lights explained, but what are the three lesser lights doing between them?**

**Why the seemingly disparate readings from scripture we solemnly give to the candidate?**

**We say nothing about the shape, pattern and meaning of the carpet, but surely it does mean something**

**Why are we always taking seven ritualistic steps in the ritual working as opposed to the Craft's three..**

**Why are triangles so very important in the layout of tracing board ?**

**From whence does the peculiar ritual of sharing the Word derive?**

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I could certainly go further. We do have a lot of **'what'** explained but in most cases we have very little **'why'**. Perhaps when our ceremony took its shape such explanations were un-necessary as in those days the classical and philosophical education and climate meant that further comment was not needed. This time long on, through time and circumstance, we have simply lost touch with the original meaning of our ritual. Our recent revision solves some of the problems by just quietly ignoring or conveniently omitting them.. Hence my attempt today to offer some possible explanations of the centre piece as still laid out in our Chapters today.

So where do we start?

Our ritual tells us that the central point, the Pedestal, is designed as a doubled cube. Traditionally, the lower cube represents earth and the upper cube represents Heaven. This is a design found all over the middle East as an altar of incense pre-dating and not restricted to the Temple of Jerusalem. In fact you will find the design in the Roman baths at Bath and even in the cemetery back in Saxmundham. But why is such an important symbol not in the middle of the carpet?

Well Companions, dividing the carpet into two squares is the line of platonic bodies representing Earth, Air, Fire and Water and the sphere of the Universe.\* In ancient times the latter did not represent the Universe as stated by our ritual but rather the ether or content of space between Heaven and earth so of course it did embrace the Universe. Nevertheless, does our line of platonic bodies therefore represent the dividing line between another two cubes? If so, on the one side we have the lower cube representing Earth and on the other we have the cube representing Heaven. We will look into this in a moment.

Let us first take a look at the carpet which nearly always has its length twice its width. This was the ratio used by Aholiab and Bezaleel in the construction of the moveable Tabernacle around which the tribes of Israel were placed in strict order on four sides.\* The order is the same as that which we lay out in our Chapters with the tribal banners - albeit using only two sides. The position of the doubled cube corresponds on the carpet to the position of the Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle although it must be stated that people in the Far East looked towards the West to Jerusalem as we find in our Craft working,\* whereas we in the West look for Jerusalem in the East. Thus the Pedestal is in the symbolic East in our Chapters and is in the centre of the square representing Heaven.

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Companions, let us start by examining the lower square representing Earth.

The VSL takes pride of place as the record of God's revealed presence here on earth. The square and compasses, the sword and trowel, the pick and shovel are adequately explained to us in our ritual and are there to illustrate our progress through the play of life with a reminder of our earthly end and of our hope for the future.

The Royal Arch carpet incorporates the symbolic chequered pattern of the Craft carpet. You will recall that our Craft path across the pain and pleasure of the carpet of life is supported by the four cardinal virtues of Prudence, Temperance, Fortitude and Justice represented by the tassels which should be at each corner of the carpet.\* We are thus reminded of the correct conduct of morality toward our fellow man as we pass through life.

But the lower square of the Royal Arch carpet additionally incorporates a two dimensional representation of the incline down towards the Vault. Our ritual tells us how the sojourners cleared away the rubbish to arrive at the crown of the vault. However, it also tells us that their progress uncovered seven pairs of pillars of exquisite design and workmanship through which the sojourners passed to reach the dome of the vault. I suggest that as the Craft is supported by the four cardinal virtues (four corners of the carpet) and the three virtues (up the ladder) the Royal Arch adds to the four cardinal virtues the three spiritual virtues of Faith, Hope and Charity as one progression.\* The seven pairs of pillars I believe to be the symbolic representation of the seven virtues which are given to guide our progress toward the light. Thus the pillars are given as a symbolic guide, a pathway, for our behaviour towards both God and our fellow man using the four cardinal virtues of the Craft together with the three spiritual virtues added to them in the Royal Arch.

I also suggest that this is why our candidate is instructed to take those special seven symbolic steps in the ritual as he approaches the sacred shrine in his exaltation. We also find those seven symbolic steps of approach used elsewhere in our working when approaching the altar.

I am suggesting that in the lower square we see our way as a Royal Arch mason across the chequered path of life, governed by the collective recommendation of the seven virtues and by the revelation by God of His Holy Will and Word as found in your VSL. This will then be followed by the lesson that revelation is possible. This however is a separate subject which I deal with elsewhere as we have now moved off the carpet and into the secret vault.

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So Companions, let us turn our attention to the upper cube or the square representing Heaven. This part of the carpet appears to be simpler in layout – fewer bits and pieces – but it is much more complicated to explain.

It is worth noting that we started the meeting with certain of the attributes of God. Omnipotent – All Powerful, Omniscient, – All Knowing and Omnipresent. On the upper cube we see the Word itself on the circle representing Eternity, enclosing the equilateral triangle – an ancient symbol of the Deity – all carried on a plate of gold, the emblem of Purity on the top of the cube representing Heaven. To me this is all adequately explained in that you have God in His Heaven who was from all beginning, is now and ever will remain, one and the same for ever. A beautiful symbolical Royal Arch representation of the Most High.

But then we come to the triangles. Let us start with the six lights we all talk about so knowledgeably as we tackle the ritual.

The three greater are explained as the Creative, Preservative and Annihilative powers of the Deity. So we have three more attributes of God to help us toward our understanding of the Most High. But what are the three lesser lights doing amongst them? We are told that they represent the Patriarchial, Mosaical and Prophetical dispensations, but these are not attributes of God. They refer to men. Why are symbols of men placed among symbols of the Deity?

If you look at the Biblical readings in the installation ceremonies you may notice that they do have something in common. In each case we have stories, somewhat loosely linked, of God talking directly to, or acting directly with, mankind. It is God in history dealing with mankind through the Patriarchs, Prophets and of course, Moses. Here we have examples of God revealing Himself. Each of the lesser lights represents a man who stood as a channel between God and His people, and with whom God communicated directly. Thus within the triangle, the ancient symbol of the Deity, on our tracing board we have this symbolical representation of the men that God called and used to talk to. His chosen people. They were closest to Him. In our symbolism they are intriguingly included within His ancient symbol.

Within the traditional symbolical Royal Arch lecture we have a careful instruction of how the lights must be arranged to form four equal and equilateral triangles.\* The real importance of the triangle has possibly, if not certainly, somewhat now faded and I ask your indulgence as I endeavour to explain. To do so, we have to go back to the Age of Enlightenment, back to the early 1700s and even earlier. The oldest Royal Arch ritual in our Library at FMH is dated 1760 and it is written in French. But take note. It was in France that the Age of Reason flourished and where philosophy first moved away from the Latin of the Church to writings in the freedom of the native tongue. This was the beginning of the flowering of the Age of Reason in which speculative freemasonry laid down its roots.

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So what is so important about the triangle?

In an address of this nature I can only gloss over the main points to extract a sufficient argument to satisfy our look at triangles as used philosophically in the Age of Reason. Let me start with Galileo.\*

In 'The Assayer'\* he wrote that – '... philosophy is written in this grand book, the Universe... It is written in the language of mathematics, and its characters are triangles, circles and other geometric figures.' He is, of course regarded as a scientist rather than a philosopher, but he was part of the movement in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century looking for a new way of proving knowledge by the logical certainty of mathematics in ALL branches of learning.

Then we come to the French philosopher Descartes.\* He is regarded as the father of modern philosophy and was an outstanding mathematician as well as a philosopher. Descartes followed Galileo's thinking in that he sought to establish secure foundations for knowledge within mathematics because its truths were undeniable. I quote 'He was fired by the vision of securing knowledge of God and the human soul, as well as of all scientific and natural phenomena, that was as certain as the conclusions of geometrical proof.' Galileo stated his proof for the existence of God that as within the triangle is contained the certain knowledge that the three angles are together equal to two right angles and this is the very essence of the triangle, so in like manner, within the idea of God the perfect Being is contained the very essence of His being.\*

We move to Spinoza. His major work 'Ethics' was completed in 1675\* and he too was a believer that mathematics was a means of proving truth about the existence of God and the secrets of the Universe. Spinoza argues that a triangle obviously exists. There is no reason or cause that could prevent its existence. If therefore there is no reason or cause which could prevent the existence of God, or take his existence from Him, He does exist. He continues to argue his case but note the starting point – the triangle. In his proposition number 16\* he also states '... but I think I have sufficiently shown that from God's supreme power or infinite nature all things have necessarily flowed or always will flow, – in like manner as from the nature of a triangle it always has followed and always will follow that its three angles should be equal to two right angles.

And so to Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz.\* Mathematician, philosopher, scientist, lawyer, engineer, inventor and historian. Leibniz was an intellectual giant and the last of the so-called polymaths. But Leibniz had another side to him in that his incredible intellectual life is said to have centred around the secret societies of alchemists and rosicrucians. He visited London, was elected a member of the Royal Society and met Sir Christopher

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Wren. I hesitate to speculate on the Masonic possibilities Leibniz was the founder of symbolic logic and his thought led quite firmly to empiricism, but his search for a universal language was again the quest to prove in all subjects, including the existence of God, the certainty provided by arithmetical and geometrical proof.

Companions, I am in no way saying that these free-thinkers necessarily agreed with one another, nor that they are alone. Indeed the 'enlightenment' was composed of many strands. This does, however, demonstrate the thinking of the age that was, of course, soon to change. The hope was that all the mysteries of nature and science including the very existence of God could be solved and demonstrated within geometrical and arithmetical proofs. It can be seen from the foregoing why they believed the triangle was so important .

For the educated authors of the Royal Arch ritual which seems to have developed at that time, it would have been natural to include a geometrical demonstration or proof as a symbol, not just that the dry impersonal God of the philosopher can exist, but of His very Being – a True and Living God Most High acting within history.

The inclusion of such an attempt at a geometrical proof of the existence of God , in those days needed no further explaining albeit that this use of philosophy coupled with the certainty of mathematics was soon to become outdated and now exists within our traditional symbolical lecture as a series of triangles for no apparent, or may I suggest, for some forgotten reason.

Let us return to the tracing board. We find in the upper square a further important use of the triangles on the tracing board translated into our personal behaviour at what must be deemed the most important element of our ritual – the communication of the sacred name.

Whilst the four triangles constructed from the three greater and the three lesser lights are all equal and equilateral, they are nevertheless **not** all formed in the same way. Three of the triangles are formed with two lesser lights and one greater light at the corners. However, the fourth central triangle is different in that it is formed of just the three lesser lights.

It is also the triangle immediately surrounding the sacred name – all representing mankind. So in our symbolism we have three similar triangles and one that is very different.

This symbolic layout can be seen to be imitated by the exalte together with two Companions in the manner of communicating the sacred name which is given on a series of triangles. The first three are all formed starting with the right hand. The fourth

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triangle is different in that it is both elevated and commenced with the left hand. In the middle of the upper square on the tracing board is the pedestal with the sacred name surrounded by the four triangles. It is similarly in the middle of the Companions' four triangles that the syllables are spoken with the elevated fourth triangle corresponding to the triangle formed by the lesser lights. I suggest that the three Companions are, by their actions, copying the symbolism of the triangles surrounding the pedestal as laid out on the floor on the tracing board. Again we have three similar triangles and a fourth one different. The use of four knocks in the Royal Arch?

Is the use of the triangle this way in our ritual meant to be a reminder or perhaps a demonstration to us of those philosophical attempts so long ago to find a proof of the existence of God using geometry and arithmetic and that mankind is nearest to Him? I venture to believe so.

The construction of the spoken ritual; the fascinating layout on the carpet and the complicated actions required to open and close the Chapter and exalt a candidate all point to the need for a better understanding of this ingenious ceremony veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols which has been handed down to us by our Masonic predecessors. We see on the Royal Arch tracing board an attempt to portray in symbolical terms the nature and existence of the Supreme Being and His closeness to mankind albeit that His Essence remains incomprehensible. We see an attempt to remind us of both His revealed Will and his actions through His chosen men within the world – His intervention in history.

Companions, I have tried to offer some further thoughts behind the fascinating display on the floor in the middle of our Chapters. I trust that all of you will have found something to think about and that maybe you will study the carpet, or may I say the Royal Arch tracing board, with a renewed interest. However, I must finish with a reminder to us that, – and I must tell you that a very senior cleric in Freemasonry once accused me of preaching for stating what our beloved Royal Arch is all about – that in spite of all the foregoing or perhaps because of it, the welfare of our fellow creatures and the honour and glory due to the TALGMH must remain our constant aim.

But Companions, it does also occur to me that to go on any longer would be to over-lard the cake – as surely as the three angles of any triangle are together equal to two right angles.

Thank you Companions.

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