

# An Alternative Explanation of the Royal and Select Master Degrees

by **Sir Knight Gene Fricks**

The legends behind the ritual of the Royal and Select Masters degrees are among those with only a vague basis in biblical antecedents. Unlike the legend of Hiram and the building of the first temple or that of Zerubabbel and the second temple, we have only a passing mention of Adoniram as the first overseer of King Solomon and a listing of Solomon's chief officers in I Kings 4:4. We do not find the secret passageway or the nine arches described in the II Kings story of the temple's construction.

Recognizing that the writers of the original rituals were men steeped in classical learning, we should look elsewhere for the source of this story. I suggest that the writings of the 15th century Arab historian, Mudjir ad-Din, may have been that source.

What prompted this thought was the celebration of the 3000th anniversary of Jerusalem several years ago and the renewed interest in its ruins that the commemoration sparked.

Let us review some of Jerusalem's history after the Roman destruction of Herod's Temple in 70 A.D. to set some background. Titus and his son Vespasian conquered Jerusalem after a long and bloody siege. Determined to bring the recalcitrant Jews to heel, the Roman 10th Legion, left to garrison the city, were ordered to level the temple down to its foundations. What we see today in Jerusalem is the temple mount platform upon which the temple sat, all that remains of Herod's imposing construction project.

As part of the effort to obliterate a Jewish identity, the city was renamed Aelia Capitolina. The Roman emperors Hadrian and Marcus Aurelius had constructed on the platform a temple to their pagan deity, Jupiter. With the conversion of the Emperor Constantine to Christianity, his mother, Helen, herself a devout Christian, spent four years in Jerusalem attempting to identify and rebuild many of the structures associated with her faith. The Byzantines made the Church of the Holy Sepulcher their religious focus in the city and ignored the temple mount, using the platform as a garbage dump.

With the conquest of Jerusalem by the Arabs about 645 A.D., a renewed effort to restore the temple mount was undertaken. The temple mount is as sacred to Moslems as it is to Jews, for they share the same ancestor, Abraham. Moslems however, claim that it was on the mount that the angel of the Lord stayed Abraham's hand from sacrificing his son Ishmael (not Isaac). Ishmael is the hereditary ancestor of the Arab peoples. It was on the mount that Mohammed was said to have ascended to Heaven. With the focus of sanctity again on the temple mount, the Arabs undertook to construct the Dome of the Rock and the Al-Asqa Mosque.

Beneath the temple mount platform is substantial construction begun during the Maccabean period and extended during Herod's construction. An aqueduct supported on

arches and bridges brought water into the structure, and numerous bridges and passageways lie beneath the platform. These, the Arabs sought to reconstruct. One of the most impressive rooms beneath the platform is what Charles Warren named "Masonic Hall" during his exploration and excavations in 1868. General Sir Charles Warren, in addition to his many military and professional accomplishments, was an ardent Freemason and a Select Master. It was due to his efforts in the last century that structures that had lain in darkness for centuries were brought again to the light.

One area that Warren brought to light he called the "Secret Passage," a long, narrow east-west passage.

Mudjir ad-Din had described this secret passage which he wrongly attributed to King David who reputedly used the passage to travel from his palace at the Citadel near the Jaffa Gate to the temple without mixing with the common people. As a result of modern archaeology, we no longer place David's (and Solomon's) palace at the citadel.

Adjacent to the passageway on the north are a series of vaults that originally supported the aqueduct and served as cisterns for water storage. The lower part of the vaults in the secret passage rests on remains from the Maccabean period (1st century B.C.). The Romans had tried to destroy it. The bridge was not restored until after the Arab conquest. One of the largest vaults, almost twenty feet high, was Warren's Masonic Hall. Despite the damage of two earthquakes during the intervening centuries, the outer wall of the Masonic Hall is partially preserved on the northern and eastern side. It is built of ashlar cut in the same meticulous manner as the ones on the western wall of the temple mount. Other structures that used this particular form of construction were of extreme religious and public importance during the Herodian period, but we have no idea for what purpose "Masonic Hall" was built.

What of the Ninth Arch? There are nine arches that carried the aqueduct above the secret passageway and that are preserved. Of course, at the point where the aqueduct entered the western wall of the temple mount, there is the most impressive Wilson's Arch, named for Warren's co-explorer, Charles Wilson. The secret passageway is blocked by the abutment formed by one wall of this arch, so it could not have been used for access to the Temple in any event. After their re-conquest of Jerusalem from the Crusaders in 1244, the Arabs built eight gates to the temple mount from the west and erected additional religious buildings on the mount to emphasize its Moslem character. This required the Arabs to construct enormous substructures to support these new buildings and raise them up to the height of the temple mount. It is likely that during the extended construction period, extensive explorations were carried out by the Arabs, if for no other reason than to assure the integrity of their new buildings. During this period, they repaired earthquake damage to "Masonic Hall" and the arches. It is also likely that Mudjir ad-Din would have been exposed to the structures to create his history.

As a side note, in the period after its reunification of Jerusalem, the Israeli government has undertaken excavations to expand Warren's work, clearing out much of what was left of the Moslem structures along the western wall of the mount. Much of this had fallen into ruin as a result of neglect and earthquake damage. Proceeding north along the wall,

there is a strange large hall built in the form of a four-armed cross supported by four enormous pillars. However, the room was not constructed by the Crusaders as it was used as the foundation for a Moslem religious school.

Warren did not explore past the Cruciform Hall in his excavations, so it was left to the Israelis to continue a narrow tunnel to the east, nine hundred feet long but only six or eight feet wide. This tunnel eventually meets the original pavement and travels along the original street for a considerable distance. What is most striking is the quality and size of the masonry work on the western wall of the mount. Some of this has been exposed for the first time in over a thousand years.

Each stone is fully dressed with carved margins and central embossing. Every stone therefore, has three margins. While the stones average in height about four feet, at one point about sixty feet north of Wilson's Arch, we come to what the archaeologists called the "Master Course." Here the stones are eleven feet tall, and the largest is forty-two feet long. Ultrasonic testing indicates that the stone is fourteen feet thick. The weight of the stone is estimated at six hundred tons. Remember that these stones were placed without the benefit of machines, with only pulleys available to aid in their placement. Another stone is forty feet long and a third is twenty-five feet. The smallest stone is six feet long. Altogether, this portion of the wall is over one hundred feet long but composed of only four stones. What was Herod's purpose in constructing so massive a wall?

It is easy to see where the stones were quarried as the quarry is at the end of the tunnel on the extreme northwest corner of the mount. Apparently, in leveling the mount to construct the platform, the builders used the materials right at hand. However, the ultrasound testing provides an intriguing clue. Apparently on the other side of this wall is an enormous hall. Without the enormous wall, Herod's builders would have had to use flying buttresses which had not yet been invented. Why a hall here? Was it to ease the weight of the fill required to level the mount? Was there a large storage area beneath the mount for the use of the temple priests? However, we do not know how wide the hall is, and archaeologists are not likely to be given authorization to excavate to find out, as to do so would offend the sensibilities of the Moslem world. Tunneling beneath the Dome of the Rock would likely lead to war.

The foundation stone of Solomon's temple lies below the Dome of the Rock. This is apparently the stone that the builders rejected. It was too large to move so its top surface was leveled off and used as the cornerstone of the building. Beneath the rock is an open chamber that was used in the medieval period and perhaps before as a prayer chamber. The Crusaders cut a hole through the foundation stone to allow the smoke from their votary candles to escape. On the top of the rock are two carved areas. One is a rectangle of just the dimensions to have fit the Ark of the Covenant. The other is a low relief carving that looks suspiciously like a keystone. It is not possible to determine when this carving was made or by whom.

Early in the 20th century, there was much interest and energy expended in discovering the sources of the Cryptic Rite ritual. There seemed to be general agreement that the Select Master degree had been manufactured to describe the activities of Charles Stuart,

the pretender to the English throne, and his friend, Louis XVI, king of France, in the person of Hiram of Tyre and Solomon. The council of three times nine were taken to represent the close supporters who had escaped to France with Charles. Thus the Select Master degree was a side degree to the 14th degree of the Scottish Rite. Until fairly recently, most Masonic writers seemed to accept that the Scottish Rite system had been formulated in France from among the supporters of the Stuarts. What has laid this tale to rest was a discovery that Charles Stuart, by his own admission, had never been a Freemason.

Under the old viewpoint, the Antients formulated the Royal Arch degree in competition with the Cryptic Rite to give the Masonic supporters of the Hanoverian king of England their own degree. Thomas Dunckerly was supposed to have removed the true word from the Master Mason degree, providing it with a substitute. The Antients' Royal Arch degree also drew on the 14th and 15th degrees of the Scottish Rite for its story line and symbolism.

The Supreme Council of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite in Charleston, South Carolina was the original possessor of the Royal and Select degrees in the United States. These were considered side degrees and as such, were under the jurisdiction of the Rite of Perfection. Henry Andrew Francken brought them with him in 1767 from France and conferred them upon Samuel Stringer, who afterward moved to Maryland, and to Moses M. Hayes, who afterward became Grand Master of Massachusetts. Hayes apparently disseminated the degrees through Massachusetts and nearby states. In 1815 a Council was formed in New Hampshire.

Joseph Myers, at the foundation of the Council of Princes of Jerusalem at Charleston in 1778, deposited a copy of these degrees in its archives, and they were conferred in 1783 in the Lodge of Perfection in Charleston. Given the condition of the Scottish Rite degrees as found and rewritten by Albert Pike, we can only wonder what the early Royal and Select degrees looked like.

Joseph Cerneau brought them in 1807 from France to New York and established a Grand Council there. This Grand Council refused to recognize those receiving the degrees from any other source. However, its subordinates outside of New York united with Councils chartered from other sources. In this Grand Council, the Super Excellent Master degree was one of the series and was conferred in its subordinate Councils at an early date. Cerneau is regarded as something of a Masonic charlatan for his role in founding the Grand Commandery in New York when he had never received the Templar orders. His association with the founding of the Grand Council lead to interesting confusion in the middle decades of the 19th century.

In 1817, the degrees were conferred in Baltimore on the members of the General Grand Chapter, Royal Arch Masons. One of the recipients was Thomas Smith Webb of Boston who was Deputy General Grand High Priest and the formulator of the Mark and Most Excellent Master degrees. He returned north to confer the degrees on others who disseminated the degrees through Massachusetts, Vermont, and New York in 1818.

Jeremy L. Cross, Grand Lecturer of the General Grand Chapter, received the Select Master degree in 1816 from Philip P. Eckel in Baltimore and received authorization to communicate the degree to Royal Arch Masons, without fee, wherever he might travel. He claimed to have received dispensation from the Past Grand Master of the Grand Council of Select Masters at Baltimore to grant dispensations to form independent Councils of Select Masters. The Grand Council of Select Masters was established at Baltimore by a Past Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Maryland; it did not survive him. Cross established thirty-three councils, including Brearley Council at Bridgeton, New Jersey on September 29, 1817, with James Giles as Thrice Illustrious Grand Master; William R. Fithian, Deputy Illustrious Grand Master; and Isaac R. Hampton, Principal Conductor. Each of these worthies was a member of Brearley Lodge No. 2 and Brearley Chapter, Royal Arch Masons. These were distinguished Freemasons in New Jersey.

James Giles was made a Mason sometime between 1776-1782 in a military lodge. In 1783, at age twenty-four, he was elected Worshipful Master of St. John's Lodge No. 2 in New York City. This was the year that the occupying British evacuated the city. In 1784 Giles was Grand Secretary of the Grand Lodge of New York. In 1790 he co-founded Brearley Lodge in Bridgeton and served it as Worshipful Master from 1790-1800 and 1812-1816. In 1815 he was elected Junior Grand Warden of the Grand Lodge of New Jersey and served as Grand Master from 1817-1819. A member of Harmony Chapter No. 52, Royal Arch Masons, in Philadelphia, he co-founded Brearley Chapter on October 16, 1815, and served as High Priest 1816-1819. On July 8, 1816, with Jeremy Cross in attendance, at a regular meeting of Brearley Lodge, Giles constituted Brearley Council of Royal and Select Masters.

William R. Fithian was raised at Brearley Lodge and elected Junior Warden in 1813. He served the lodge as Worshipful Master in 1817 and again in 1825. Exalted in Brearley Chapter in 1816, he served the chapter in various stations until 1827.

Isaac Hampton served Brearley Lodge as Worshipful Master in 1820-1821, 1834-1835, and 1840-1849. He was elected Senior Grand Warden in 1826-1827 and Grand Master of Masons in New Jersey 1828-1829.<sup>1</sup>

Jeremy Cross is perhaps better known for having developed the idea of the symbol of the broken column, the weeping virgin, and Father Time to represent a fallen brother.

In 1829 James Cushman, also an itinerant lecturer and possibly an associate of Cross, went to Virginia and granted dispensations to form seven or eight Councils in various parts of that state. In 1820 a sufficient number of Councils existed in Virginia to form a Grand Council which continued until 1841. At that time, the Grand Council learned what had transpired in Maryland and, wishing to dissociate themselves from what was regarded as a fraud (no matter how innocently perpetrated), dissolved itself. Afterward, the Virginia Grand Chapter assumed jurisdiction over the Cryptic degrees.

The Royal and Select degrees had originally been brought to the United States in 1783 and placed under the control of the Supreme Council, 330. Mackey indicated that charters were given by representatives of the Supreme Council. The Royal and Select

Councils eventually transferred their allegiance to the state Grand Councils. The constitution of the southern jurisdiction Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite actually contains a provision that the Supreme Council will exercise control over Royal and Select councils in states where no Grand Council exists. Every Sovereign Grand Inspector General in the southern jurisdiction would be a member of the Grand Council created under their auspices. This actually was the case in Mississippi in 1828.

The Northern Scottish Rite Supreme Council neither claimed nor exercised such powers, leaving the entire matter to the Grand Councils. The Grand Council of Pennsylvania was formed in 1847.

The Most Puissant Grand Council of Royal and Select Masters of the State of New Jersey was constituted at New Brunswick on November 26, 1860. At its sixth Annual Assembly in 1864, the Grand Council of New Jersey adopted the form of the Royal and Select degrees as practiced by the Grand Council of Connecticut and added the Super Excellent Master degree.

Sir Knight Fricks served Crusade Commandery No. 23, Haddofield, New Jersey, as Eminent Commander and the Grand Commandery of New Jersey as Grand Historian. Most importantly, he regards Sir Knight Richard Van Doren, whose recent work prompted this paper, as a fast friend and valued colleague. He can be contacted at [genefricks@comcast.net](mailto:genefricks@comcast.net).

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