

Provincial RAM Assembly

A Deeper Meaning of the Royal Ark Mariner Ceremony

I set out to prepare this address metaphorically dressed again in the habiliments of a distressed Mason but this time I was a member of a Royal Ark Mariner Lodge wandering away suitably clad seeking the deeper meaning of the Royal Ark Ceremony.

Where should I look? In the biblical account in which it is set? In the back ground to the degree? In the artefacts used in the degree. In the words of the ceremony?

Where? Where? Where?

Well for sure it would not be a straight path, it was likely to have twists, turns, and some backtracking. I realised I could tread on some dangerous ground as the whole of the Royal Ark Mariner Degree is based upon the account of Noah as set out in Genesis the first book in the Bible. At one time this was treated as absolute fact but for many it is an illustrative story. For much of the time today I shall be considering the story as fact when looking at its meaning for our degree.

The Royal Ark Mariners Degree has little connection with the Craft, Holy Royal Arch or the Mark Degrees the beautiful inspirational words of its ceremonies clearly distinguishing it from those orders connected with the building of King Solomon's Temple.

The degree is certainly one of if not the oldest taking its basis from the description in Genesis of the Flood and the part played by Noah the antediluvian patriarch in saving man and animal life.

Noah would have been a formidable character since as an antediluvian, someone living before the Flood, he would have lived to ten times the age of those born after the Flood and would have been an unassailable patriarch, a man in a man's world where the male was the primary authority figure, central to all social organization. He was however a creature of his God and obedient to His commands.

In addition to looking at the significance of Noah's role in what is thought by many to be the most interesting of all degree ceremonies, I tried to examine some ideas as to how and why the Royal Ark Mariner Ceremony came into existence.

You will not be surprised to hear that I found that like most degrees in Freemasonry the early history of the Royal Ark Mariner Degree is obscure, and its precise origins are unknown. It is known to have been worked for more than two hundred and fifty years. As its name suggested, it has a nautical flavour. I looked for the reason why this degree uses wood and woodworkers tools – to no avail - perhaps the sensitivities of a particularly important guild had to be recognised.

Back to God's instructions to Noah. The book of Genesis recounts that having begun with Adam and Eve, the family of man grew in numbers and filled the earth. They had forgotten their divine origin and become wicked, and greedy. The Lord said, "I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth, both man and beast, creeping thing and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them" But God was benevolent. He called Noah and ordered him to build an Ark out of gopher wood and to go aboard the ark with his wife his three sons and their wives. Also he said "of every living thing of all flesh, you

shall bring two of every sort into the ark, to keep them alive with you; they shall be male and female. Also you will take with you every sort of food that is eaten”, Noah did all that God commanded him. So the meaning for us could be obedience to the will of the Glorious Commander of Heaven and Earth.

Genesis continues that after they boarded the ark, it rained forty days and forty nights. The water rose and every living thing on earth was destroyed except the ark and its contents. The flood lasted 150 days before the water began to recede. When Noah felt that sufficient time had elapsed, he let out a dove, which returned finding no place to alight. After another seven days, he sent the dove again which returned with Olive leaves in its beak. The ark came to rest on Mt Ararat in the mountains of Armenia. Noah was grateful for his deliverance and built an altar and gave burnt offering to the Lord for His mercy. God blessed Noah and his sons telling them to “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth”. Thereafter God entered into a covenant with Noah and as a sign of this God made a rainbow appear in the sky.

Was the meaning here in Noah’s perseverance and in how we in our turn are to use the great gift granted to mankind and evidenced by the rainbow.

What about how men throughout the centuries have treated the story of Noah and the Flood it has certainly captured the imagination of Christians and also non believers.

Presentations of the legend of Noah, his sons, the Ark and the Deluge were enacted in the Mystery Plays of mediaeval times when troupes went from village to village telling the story and informing people who could not read or write about the bible and its teachings.

The Noah story was later used in early Masonic meetings as a catechism using memorised questions and answers, a format used in religious and secular contexts.

This method of teaching was very prevalent in other Masonic degrees and by promoting interaction between lodge members probably led to a good understanding of masonic principles.

In a catechism any candidate needing deeper understanding could easily seek information or if he gave an incorrect answer could have his error corrected.

Were there any clues in the development of the degree? In the 1750’s a Degree of Noachites appears in literature particularly in Scotland but the first authentic record of a Royal Ark Mariners degree occurs in the minutes of a meeting held in Bath in 1790. Then numerous records exist throughout England of the ceremony of Elevation being performed since that date possibly as part of other degrees

One interesting side alley I strayed into was the account from the Graham Manuscript dated 1726 and discovered in 1936 which purports that the third degree raising was of Noah by his three sons and that there was “marrow in the bones”. This does not have any corroboration. It led to no greater depth of understanding but it did make me wonder what changes have taken place of which we have little knowledge.

What about the form of the Lodge. The present day RAM Lodge is like the ark, governed by Noah and two of his sons Shem and Japheth; with the youngest holding the higher office Senior Warden and the eldest Junior Warden, suggesting another meaning that merit and

ability should take precedence over seniority. Noah's second son Ham is not represented. He was not of good report even though Genesis tells us he did not fall from Grace until after the Ark had come to rest. So does this mean our Ark is a representation of the Ark several years after it had come to rest and been moored.

Alternatively it may be that the exclusion of Ham from our ceremonies before the Ark's departure was brought by the prejudices of the eighteenth century

The Lodge resembling the interior of the ark, is in the shape of an equilateral triangle, a perfect geometrical shape which has been used by many religions to depict the Almighty. In our ceremonies its angles symbolise wisdom, strength and beauty. The Holy Triangle is placed on the Porphyry Stone. Stone occupies an important position in Masonic degrees. It appears in Craft as the rough and perfect ashlar, in Mark as the Key Stone and in Chapter as the Arch Stone and the Altar. In the RAM Degree it is on the Porphyry Stone that the Lodge is opened. Is the deeper meaning to be found in links with other degrees.

Turning the search to the artefacts of the RAM degree. The Porphyry stone is not mentioned in the Bible and yet it occupies an important place in the degree not only as Noah's resting place after labour but also as the anchor of hope when the Ark came to rest and the place for Noah's first offering to God following the Ark's safe deliverance.

In each case its use is as a place of certainty, at night, after peril and when giving thanks.

How it became incorporated into our ceremonies is a mystery. Porphyry is an igneous rock consisting of large crystals of quartz, in a fine-grained groundmass. The word "porphyry" is from Greek meaning "purple". Purple was the colour of royalty, and "Imperial Porphyry" was prized for monuments and buildings in Imperial Roman and Byzantium monuments It was used in the official delivery room for use of pregnant Empresses in the Great Palace of Constantinople and Napoleon was interred in a porphyry sarcophagus under the dome at Les Invalides in Paris.

Backtracking to Ham. Whilst porphyry appears without explanation so Noah's second son Ham disappears and is not mentioned in our ceremonies. Genesis has him involved in building the Ark and after the flood.

In Genesis after the Ark has come to rest and life begins again Noah becomes a farmer and grows many crops and establishes a vineyard. Having turned some of his grapes into wine he drinks too heavily and falls asleep in a state of undress and is discovered thus by Ham who "looks on his nakedness" and tells his brothers with mockery, they cover their father with their eyes averted and so deal with his weakness in as kindly a way as possible.

The text may be hinting at a situation not readily spoken of at the time of translation with delicacy towards exposure of bodily flesh. Nonetheless Ham is punished as God states that his son Canaan will be cursed. Yes it does seem that the ritualists of the time felt it was best to ignore Ham.

The three sons of Noah then went on and according to legend established all the peoples of the earth but with only two sons in our ceremony we cannot look there for meaning.

Well does correlation between writing and evidence give any help to the search? The dimensions and construction details of the Ark which came to rest in the mountains of Armenia are set out in Genesis and many attempts have been made to prove the actual

happening of the great flood as recorded in the Bible. In 1929 the archaeologist Sir Leonard Woolley, claimed to have found clear evidence of the flood, that it occurred some 6000 years previously, and covered an area of some 4000 square miles of what was then Mesopotamia, and is now Iraq. Similarly, scientists looking for evidence of the Ark on the Turkish – Iranian border using aerial photography and radar imagery believed they had found the remains of the Ark several feet below ground in the mountains of Ararat at an altitude of 7000 feet. The image appeared to be about 450 feet in length and compared favourably with the 300 cubits specified in Genesis. The Ark was 450 feet long 75 feet in beam and 45 feet high. A vessel of such dimensions whilst unsuitable for navigation, could hold much cargo and still float having a displacement of 20,000 tons.

Since then many writers have examined the possibility of a vessel of the size being able to house all the animals and food with some pretty interesting theories including loading extra giant tortoises to provide meat for the carnivores and only taking baby dinosaurs to save space. I have not found any mention of what happened to the fish and amphibians irrespective of whether the flood was salt/fresh or brackish water.

A puzzling place to look for meaning as the number of theories is almost endless.

Incidentally a scale model of the Ark and other explanations can be found at an amusement and zoo park near Bristol.

Turning to look for meaning in the flood there are in addition to the biblical account many similar versions. Dr. Duane Gish an unashamed creationist, has identified more than 270 from different cultures around the world all containing similarities to Noah's Flood. I will give examples from distant parts of the world.

Hawaiians have a flood story when, long after the death of the first man, the world became a wicked, terrible place. Only one good man was left, and his name was Nu-u. He made a great canoe with a house on it and filled it with animals. In this story, the waters came up over all the earth and killed all the people; only Nu-u and his family were saved. As Hawaii is really remote the chances of stories travelling there from far away are not likely.

Another flood story is from China. It records that Fuhi, his wife, three sons, and three daughters escaped a great flood and were the only people alive on earth. After the great flood, they repopulated the world.

Some flood stories were inspired by ancient observations of seashells and fish fossils inland and on mountains. The ancient Greeks, Egyptians, Romans, and Chinese all wrote about finding such remains. Native Americans also expressed their belief in a flood in their early encounters with Europeans, though they had nothing written down.

Flooding is also explained by river floods perhaps like Australia, tsunamis from volcanic eruptions or meteor impact or rapid draining of ice age lakes into the Mediterranean

Enough of floods what is to be learned from the role of the dove in our ceremonies?

Remember Noah released a dove three times, first trip it came back with nothing, second trip it brought an olive leaf, third trip the dove does not return a sign that the Great Flood

had ended. Is the meaning to be found in Noah's trust that the ark will be rescued, is it in his use of a messenger and is this why we have Deacons with wands surmounted by doves
What can be concluded from the olive leaves the dove found? They were a puzzle for me at first as olives grow slowly so how did the dove find a leaf so readily. Then my wife reminded me that olives are tough trees and even after being submerged there would be some albeit muddy leaves for the dove to retrieve. Anyway maybe the message lies in the olive's special qualities associated with peace and harmony, providing oil for lamps whilst its hardness suggests fertility and vital energy.

By the way did you know that after Union of craft degrees the deacon's wand emblem was changed to a dove bearing an olive branch in its mouth replacing Mercury, the pagan messenger of the Gods, which we still see in Mark Lodges this was probably due to eighteenth century Christian influences

Before I finish does the Rainbow a defining emblem for our degree point to the deeper meaning, will it be found at the end.

To see a rainbow we need sunshine and falling rain. Rainbows are fairly rare as in any one place in rainy England there are fewer than ten bright ones in a year. They are best seen early morning and late afternoon always opposite the sun. The lower the sun the higher the bow and occasionally, when the raindrops are small, fainter arcs of greens, pinks and purples lie just inside the main bow. The sky inside is bright because raindrops direct light there too. In the bible the rainbow was a symbol of Gods covenant to man never to destroy the earth again by water a token of His infinite mercy in sustaining mankind.

Did I find a deeper meaning? Well yes to some extent in each of the many places where I looked - some of which I have shared with you today. But I do think I found something extra in the searching, going along fruitful paths, straying up blind alleys, disagreeing with some pretty weird views and most of all by having my interest stimulated and that quest could do the same for you.

So brethren talk, discuss, chat with other Royal Ark Mariners about what you find difficult, whatever seems inconsistent, ask senior officers and above all talk with everyone, especially non-members, about what you enjoy and find rewarding. This will heighten your appreciation of the degree and encourage others to join and we all know someone who that will please.

If you want somewhere to start, think about the 9 steps leading to refuge in the Ark, refuge we must build for own and Masonic families and not least the refuge we need to build in our hearts against the errors and vices of the world.

Brethren all I thank you for your attention.

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