The Veils In Royal Arch Masonry

The ceremony of “passing the veils” or the use of the veils in Royal Arch ceremonies is as old as the Degree itself, and its origins are, with the degree, lost in the oral traditions of the past. Some say it symbolizes the difficulties encountered by the Jews on their returning journey from Babylon with the holy vessels taken by Nebuchadnezzar; others that it involves the veils of the Tabernacle of Moses or those of the Temple of Solomon. More respected commentators note it as a reference to the rending of the veil of the last Temple on our Lord’s death on the Cross.1

The use of veils originated, with the Royal Arch, in English Freemasonry and was well known, with some distinctions, in Ireland and Scotland. Originally, the work was with three veils, with the fourth being used in Ireland and, of course, here. In Scotland, the ceremony in fact forms the Excellent Master Degree.

Much of the confusion in the symbolism comes from the Jewish historian Josephus, who declares:

“When Moses distinguished the tabernacle into three parts, and allowed two of them to the priests, as a place accessible and common, he denoted the land and the sea, these being of general access to all; but he set apart the third division for God, because Heaven is inaccessible to men...”

“The veils, too, which were composed of four things, they declared the four elements; for the fine linen was proper to signify the earth, because the flax grows out of the earth; the purple signified the sea, because that colour is dyed by the blood of a sea shell fish; the blue is fit to signify the air; and the scarlet will naturally be an indication of fire”2

As some commentators have noted, Josephus imported into his description of the original Tabernacle a feature which it did not possess, i.e. division into three parts. The Temple of Herod which existed in Josephus’ time indeed had a third part, the Porch, and he erroneously concluded that the Mosaic Tabernacle was likewise so separated. In fact, Scripture tells us it was not.

The original Tabernacle of Moses as created by Divine instruction consisted of a tent covered in ram skins with a wooden frame and divided into two parts by ten curtains of fine linen, coloured blue, purple and scarlet. The curtains were coupled in units of five, and served to separate the Holy of Holies from the ordinary people.3

The curtains served to surround the Ark of the Covenant and bar its view from the people. It was in fact deemed to be the dwelling place of the Lord.4

It was these curtains surrounding the Ark which later gave rise to the use of veils in the construction of Solomon’s Temple, the second Temple of Zerubbabel, and Herod’s Temple, which enlarged on Prince Z.’s work and instituted the Porch and exterior courts. Only the High Priest could enter into the Holy of Holies’ portion through the veil or curtain which separated God’s dwelling place from those of the priesthood and the people, i.e., symbolically, Heaven and Earth. And he could enter only as a representative of the people once a year on the Day of Atonement.

As we examine sacred history, therefore, it would seem that originally there was only one veil or
curtain in the Tabernacle, although it may well be that more were added in the building of the final Herodian Temple. But, again, Scripture mentions only the one separating the Holy of Holies from the balance of the Temple, when it records the death of our Lord. Thus, Matthew relates:

“And, behold, the veil of the temple was rent in twain from top to the bottom; and the earth did quake, and the rocks rent at the death of Christ.5

From the days of the Tabernacle, there is no doubt, however, that the veil or curtains symbolized the separation between God and man, and it is significant that the veils ceremony disappeared from English Royal Arch Masonry when its Ritual was de-Christianized in 1835.6 It has nonetheless continued in America, which seems to have followed the Irish ceremonies more than the English or Scottish practice.

Thus, we have continued to use the ceremony of the veils to symbolize to the candidate for the Royal Arch, i.e., he who seeks successfully to find our lost connection with the Almighty, the various difficulties which are strewn in his path, and which can be overcome only by knowledge of passwords symbolizing a former connection with God. Thus, at last, he reaches the Fourth veil, which divides the Sanctuary from the balance of the Arch. There, to gain admittance, he uses the Signet, which represents divine Truth. And as that final veil dividing God from the world was rent on the death of our Saviour, so does it signify that our attainment of His truth means we have become one with Him; symbolically, that His birth, life, death, and Resurrection, have removed all barriers between man and the Holy of Holies God Himself.

Indeed, as we overcome the veils of ignorance, hatred, unbelief, and gain Truth in our Lord, we find that which we have lost and for which we have sought symbolically.

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2. Details of the construction of the Tabernacle, the making of the curtains, and the role played by Moses, Aholiab, and Bezaleel in the work are set forth at great length in Exodus 26 through 36.

3. “... That the king said unto Nathan the prophet, See now, I dwell in an house of cedar, but the ark of God dwelleth within curtains.” See also the same matter in I Chronicles 17: 1.

4. Matthew 27:51 (KJV)

5. It is retained in Bristol Chapter practice, but this dates from a revival occasioned by the enthusiasm of Sir Ernest Cook and others in the early 1900's. See Jones, op. cit., fn 1.