

## THE ROYAL ARCH OR SACRED VAULT TRADITION IN FREEMASONRY

One of the great mysteries of life is that no man can know the principle of his own life. No single element of life has an intrinsic essential reality of its own. The power and action of will, movement, of thought, memory and dreams are all mysteries. Yet we have a natural impulse to see the unknown, to see God in the mystery of our own being.

The Royal Arch Tradition maintains that a man must gain access to the knowledge of the Divine truth only by seeking ever deeper within his inmost self, his soul. We are informed that the most sacred treasures of Freemasonry are hidden in darkness; concealed from view by those who are not prepared to receive them. Indeed, one of the three great Bodies of the York Rite is styled "Cryptic" Masonry. This word comes from a Greek word meaning "to hide." It is a concealed place, a subterranean vault. We are even given a hint in the Royal Master Degree that the sacred treasure may be found in an underground vault. It would seem we are led to believe that we may find the Lost Word by looking within.

Yet, we also find in the historical lecture of the Royal Arch Degree that we actually ascend by regular graduations, to the summit of our royal art. In the Entered Apprentice Degree, we encounter a ladder leading upward from the ground floor of the temple; whose principal rungs are faith, hope and charity. In the Fellowcraft Degree, the ascension takes the form of a set of winding stairs, at the summit of which the candidate, in his new-found glory, beholds himself as a mirror image of his own Divine nature. What does it mean, then, that we must both ascend and descend to search for the most divine nature of our soul?

In Freemasonry, we are thus confronted with a metaphor that represents one of the foundational symbolic images in the study of spirituality. The image of both ascending and descending is very common in the Degrees of Freemasonry. Its fundamental meaning is one of self-awareness and transcendence. The metaphor is most often represented by a ladder or stairs. In Masonic symbolism, both descents and horizontal movements into a cave, vault, or tunnel represent moving downward into the personae of one's own mind and unconsciousness. The purpose of this movement, whether ascending or descending, is for the aspirant to discover his own true nature and his connection with nature, or the universe, or the Divine. It is no less than the hero's quest. In mythology, the quest of the hero can almost always be understood as a descent into one's own mind to discover his true nature and identity. In the Degrees of the Blue Lodge, this descent is represented by the circumambulations about the lodge.

The thing to be gained on this journey into oneself is insight, not just knowledge. That is why it is a personal quest. Knowledge can be gained from books or from a teacher, but insight must be the result of the individual's confrontation and exploration of his own thoughts, feelings, experiences and

understandings. Real knowledge of yourself cannot be given you by someone else. You must go deep inside yourself to discover the meaning of your existence.

Ascending is represented by movement upwards on a ladder or stairs, or by a horizontal movement as in emerging from a cave or tunnel. It symbolizes changes in levels of consciousness, increasing awareness, and ultimately a knowing of the Deity in a way which can only be experienced within oneself. It is transcendent, ineffable and individual. It is sometimes known as the mystic experience. Most spiritual traditions teach that the insight of the self-journey is necessary before the experience of transcendence is possible. The winding stairs lead to the Middle Chamber which may be understood to represent insight, intuition, revelation and gnosis. It is another representation of the Sanctum Sanctorum or the Holy of Holies in King Solomon's temple—man confronting his own identity with God.

In Masonry, the Royal Arch, or Sacred Vault tradition represents this deeply engaging and hidden symbol of Man's highest aspiration, reminding us that it is the internal and not the external qualifications that make a Mason. A man's soul is his spiritual dimension of the universe, the inmost part of his being where alone he may feel and realize the nature of God and find peace within himself. The goal is to be able to say, with Judas Maccabaeus "I feel the Deity within."

The Royal Arch raises Masonry higher on Jacob's ladder of Awareness and Awakening towards communion with the True and Living God, and the eventual transcendental integration in the life hereafter of the human creature with his Divine Creator. This is the greatest quest we will ever take.