

ROYAL ARCH BANNERS Part 1

Imagine we are taking a journey back in time. The year is 1898. Pretend for a moment that you are the Most Excellent Grand High Priest of all Royal Arch Masons in Texas.

You have made it your mission during your term in office to visit several of the constituent chapters of the Grand Chapter. What would you see that would be different from our modern day chapters during the various stated convocations, degree conferrals, and special events that might occupy your time?

One thing that most Texas Royal Arch Masons would find would be a set of props or regalia furniture that has fallen out of use as the standard setup for a chapter of Royal Masons. This set of props contains four banners of the four tribes of Israel as taught in the Old Testament and perpetuated through tradition.

According to our Very Excellent Eldon L. Brooks, a Past Grand High Priest, all Texas Chapters chartered on or before the year 1900 use these four banners of the tribes of Israel in conjunction with the four veils of the Tabernacle and/or the stations of the masters of the veils. I, Jeff Bennett, personally discovered this during an official visit on behalf of V:E: James Roy Elliott to Fort Worth Chapter in my year as District Deputy Grand High Priest. Fort Worth Chapter is the oldest chartered chapter in Tarrant County and utilizes these banners at the stations of the veils during their stated meetings. So what do these four banners represent? Why did our founders see them significant to the lessons taught by a Royal Arch Chapter?

We obtain Masonic knowledge in various ways. One way is by being initiated through degree conferrals. Another is through contemplating the ritual while either studying for a conferral or being present at the conferral of a degree. Yet, sometimes a true grasp of the essence of the teaching of a degree needs to be pursued by further study, by looking into its history, and researching learned sources.

The Royal Arch degree may have taken up to six hours to confer in the early years of our fraternity. So things that our companions explained well in previous times may simply be referenced in our modern adaptation and condensation of the ritual text. Thus, our companions

conferring a degree may not expound upon the full meaning of key symbols, leaving the initiated without a clear picture of the symbolism found and enriched in earlier days.

Few researchers have produced information on the Twelve Tribes whose banners we use in the Royal Arch Degree. These tribes play a very big part in many of the degrees of our order. The tribal life also played a large part in the life of the Israelites and their history is closely interwoven with our ritual. Therefore, some knowledge of their history, customs, and practices must give us all a better understanding of our ritual and how it fits within the framework of Capitular Masonry.

The four banners displayed by Texas Chapters are one of the most decorative features of our chapter rooms and some brief reminders of their meaning are included in our work. Yet, the banners themselves play only a minimal part in our conferrals, and we make only a passing reference to the tribes in the lectures of our degrees.

The references are made in different degrees depending on how we confer them. Some writers construe the arrangements of our chapter rooms as the camping order of the Israelites. Thus, the banners represent the tribes, and the altar represents the Ark of the Covenant. Because Jacob had twelve sons it is often, but erroneously, assumed that the twelve tribes of Israel were named after his sons. This is incorrect. Ten of the Tribes were named after the sons of Jacob, but two were named after two of his grandsons.

Ephraim and Manasseh were the sons of Joseph. Joseph had no tribe named after him!

In his book, " The Ensigns of the Twelve Tribes of Israel," Harry Mendoza indicates that it was customary in Israel for the eldest son to receive two portions of his Father's estate. But Reuben, who was Jacob's eldest son, fell foul of his father for misconduct with his father's concubine, so he only received a single inheritance. Levi and Joseph also received no territory but for different reasons. Levi and his brother Simeon also fell into disfavor with their father because of what Jacob considered traitorous and unseemly conduct. Levi and his descendants were directed to serve the other tribes as priests, and were scattered among the other tribes. The Levites were also responsible for transporting the Ark of the Covenant and all the coverings and equipment. Simeon, however,

appears to have received similar benefits as the other brothers. Instead of a territory he was given nineteen unconnected cities, located within the territory allocated to Judah.

Joseph, who was probably the favorite son because of feeding his family while they were in Egypt, was honored by having his sons Ephraim and Manasseh partake of Jacob's blessing. Thus the twelve tribes originated from the ten sons and two Grandsons of the Patriarch Jacob. On his deathbed the sons of Jacob received what has become known as "Jacob's Blessing", although in some cases it was more of a curse (Genesis 49). Jacob's two Grandsons received a blessing from Moses (Deuteronomy 32, 33). The actual blessings become important because they are the basis of the devices shown on the banners or ensigns.

The positions occupied by the Tribes when on their march and when they camped were designed to protect the Ark of the Covenant at all times. "Every man of the children of Israel shall pitch by his own standard, with the ensign of his father's house; far off about the tabernacle of the congregation shall they pitch" (Numbers 2:2).

In the East were Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun.

In the South were Reuben, Simeon, and Gad.

In the West were Ephraim, Manasseh, and Benjamin.

In the North were Dan, Asher, and Naptholi."

Looking at these names in the Bible and at the banners in a chapter room most in use in England and Scotland, they appear to be very neat, compact and a comfortable size. However if these names are translated into people, it becomes a vastly different picture. According to the 2nd Chapter of Numbers, a census was taken of all male members of the tribes over 20 years of age and suitable as warriors and these are the following figures:

JUDAH	74,600
ISSACHER	54,400
ZEBULUN	57,400
REUBEN	46,500
SIMEON	59,300
GAD	45,650
EPHRAIM	40,500
MANASSEH	32,200

BENJAMIN	35,400
DAN	62,700
ASHER	41,500
NAPTHALI	53,400

A TOTAL OF 603,550 FIGHTING MEN

Additionally there were 22,300 male Levites aged one month or more, 8,580 of whom were required to transport the Ark and its related equipment. This was an army of more than half a million men, and to these must be added the men who were not fit for the army, along with the women and children, so the aggregate must be well over a million people. Additionally, there would have been sheep, goats and cattle to accompany them. The logistics of their moving or even camping must have been tremendous. The previous facts speak for themselves. There can be little discussion as they come from a most reliable source, which is the Bible, or the Volume of Sacred Law (V.S.L).

Now we come to the banners' ensigns and standards. There is mention in the V.S.L. of banners and ensigns, but there is no reference to their colors and the devices that adorned them. There would have to be some means of distinguishing the various tribes so that the members would know where to camp or where to march. The descriptions and coloring of the banners has been added by our Masonic forbearers and variations now become visible.

Early Masonry, as we know it, evolved from the Grand Chapters or Lodges of England, Ireland, and Scotland. Other Grand Bodies adopted, and in some cases, adapted these schools of thought to their own wishes. These practices were brought to Texas out of those Royal Arch traditions by the founders of our state and our state's Masonry. In Part 2 of this short talk, we will explore the four banners used in Texas chapters, their meaning, and importance to the richness of the lessons in the Royal Arch.

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